



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



BLOG POST: 2023.09.26
The Milky Way, Fisher Towers, Utah

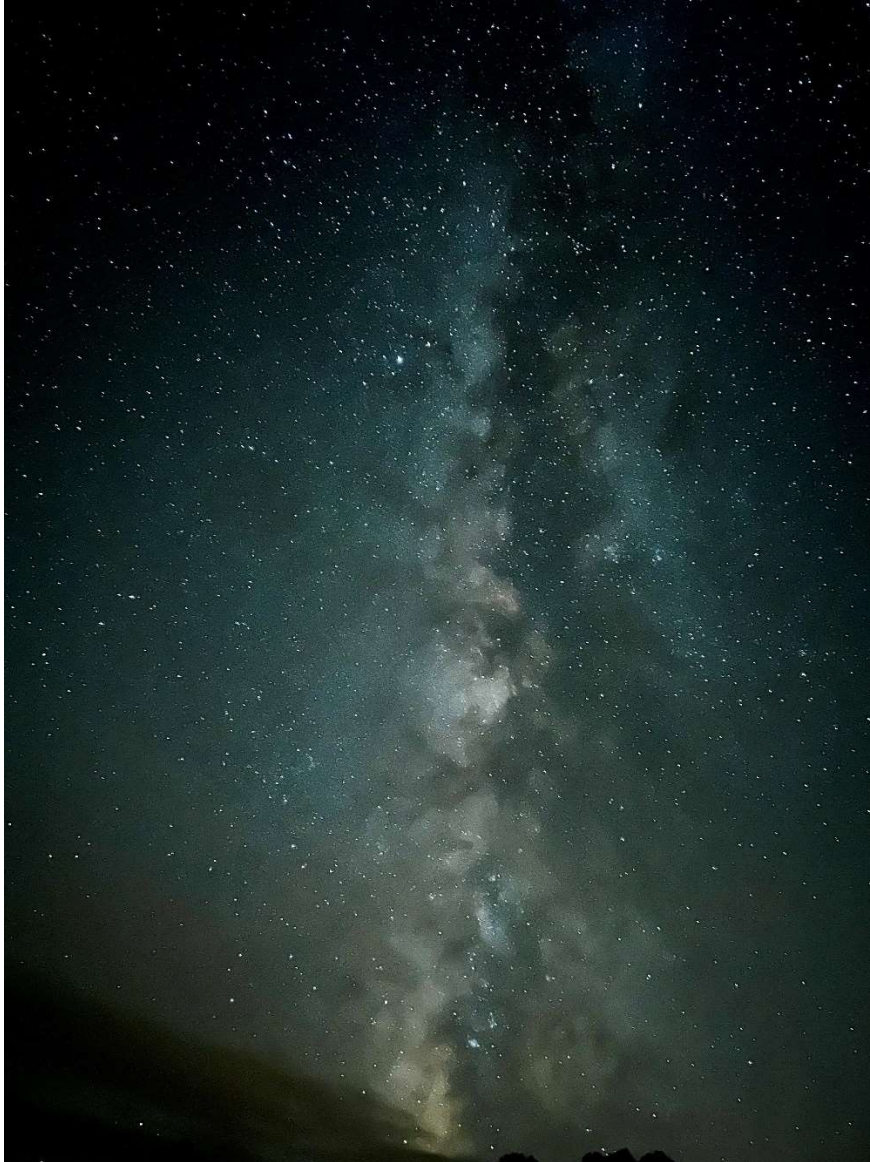


Back to Fisher Towers for the third time this summer. I had drone videos in mind, primarily, but just like in June, the winds were too high and too gusty.

Surprisingly, I was kinda OK with that because I had a Plan B that was practically a Plan A: more night-sky photography. Encouraged by my Big Dipper shots from a few weeks before, I was eager to apply some freshly-gained knowledge and see what kind of astrophotography my iPhone 13 Pro could actually achieve. [Spoiler Alert: see photo above.]

My “usual” site (#2) was taken, and opted for site #3, with its modicum of shade and its lower-tier, higher-privacy picnic area. I busied myself with words and images on my laptop while darkness wrapped its arms around the area. By the time I looked out the side window to check, the sky was rife with stars and it was time to pull out the new bag of tricks.

There is a Facebook group dedicated to iPhone photography. It is connected to an online course offered by a man named Emil Pakarklis. I watched a few of his videos and learned quite a few things about long exposure and light/focus settings, as well as burst mode and a few more. Emil explains things well, and he demonstrates everything. He offers a full course and a full editing course – for fees – but a number of his very informative videos were offered for free.



But it was one of the group members who provided this particular post that included detailed settings and exactly how to access them. I had taken a screen shot of the post (what, did you think I *wrote them down??*), and set about pre-setting them while inside the van. I mounted my phone on my mini-tripod and activated the Bluetooth remote control that came with the selfie stick that I never use. I carried it all out to the picnic table, along with two cans of cold IPA. It was darrrrk out there. No moon tonight and only a few clouds, and they were hugging the horizon. Prime conditions.

The settings, if you are wondering:

First, the “Night” setting. In the upper left corner of the screen, there is a lightning bolt icon (the flash) and a crescent moon icon (night). Tap the moon and it becomes a yellow oval, with a number and the letter “s” (i.e., “3s” indicating “3 seconds”). To adjust that, click on the little arrowhead in the top-middle of the screen and a row of icons appears below the image area. Second from the left is that moon again, this time in yellow. Tap it and a slider scale appears, probably showing a center position and “Auto (5s)” above it. Move the slider all the way to the left and you’ll get the maximum setting. Then tap the now-yellow down arrow in the top-center to close that lower menu.

Now tap it again to reopen that lower row of icons. The one on the far right will be a “+” and a “-“ in a circle. Click on that and you’ll see another slider with the label “Exposure” on the right. Slide that one all the way to the right also and you’ll get the maximum “+2.0” setting. Tap the top-center yellow down arrow to close that lower menu

and lock in the new setting. You'll see both new settings displayed just to the left of the now-white up-arrow.

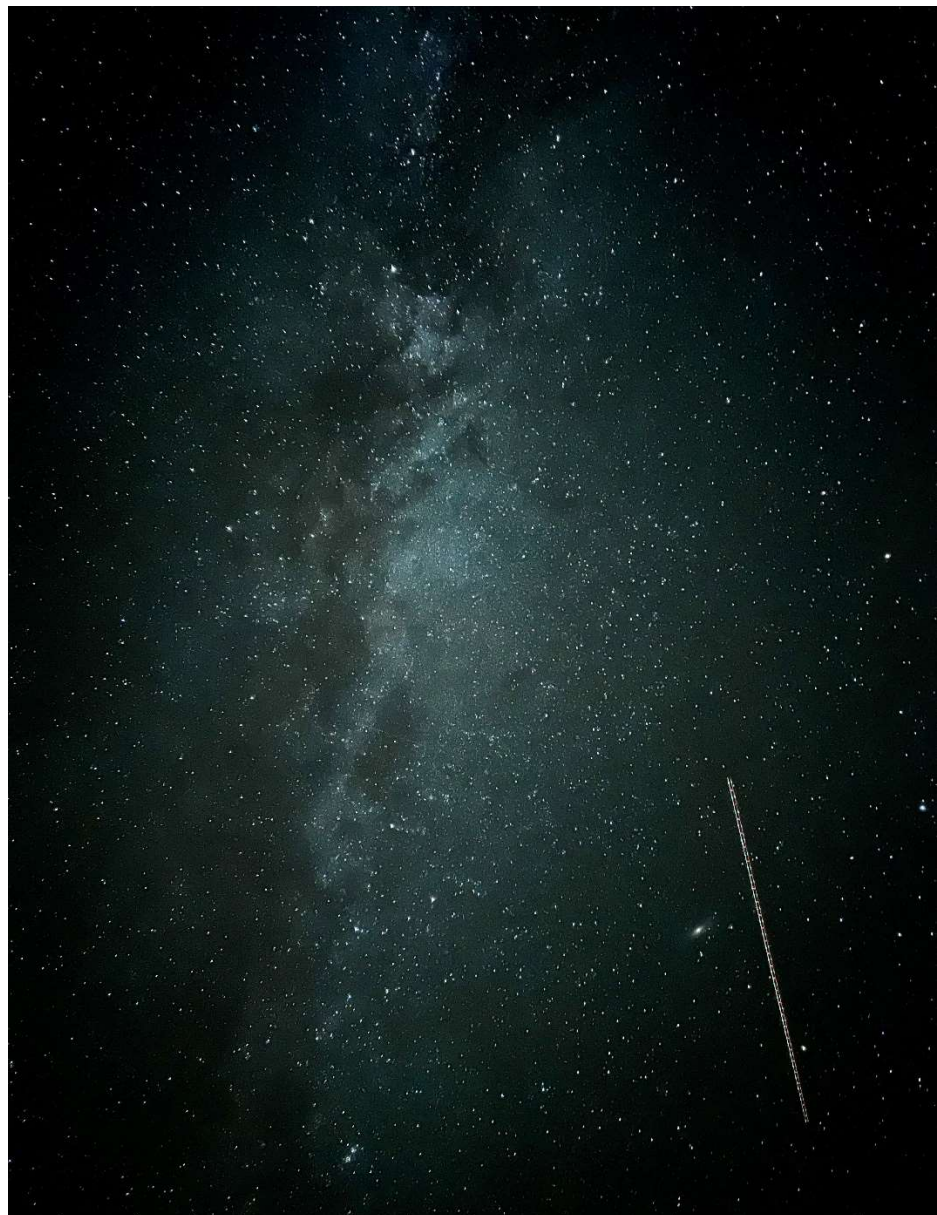
You are absolutely going to need the camera to be totally still. Holding it will not work. Bracing it against something solid probably won't either. Tripod is best, and even better if you block the wind from causing any minor shaking or trembling.

You can employ the built-in timer as well, but that's yet another screen setting. The remote was simple. Even with the tripod setup and the screen facing down (i.e., lens facing the sky, duh), you can see the glow shift as the capture opens and closes. In fact, lacking a tripod, you can even lie the camera flat (screen down) on the table and the remote will still trigger the shutter and you will get a stable image capture.

I started with a couple of shots aimed to the east, where I'd get the silhouette of the towers in the low part of the frame. They looked pretty good.

By now, my naked eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and I was seeing more and more stars with each passing minute. There was kind of a light fuzz directly overhead, and I wondered, "Is that the Milky Way, or are those just high thin clouds?"

So, I set up the tripod angled that way, just above the horizon, and clicked the remote. I was checking the screen after every couple of captures,



and things looked quite promising. If anything, they looked *over-exposed*. I took several more angles as I knocked off the second of the two beers.

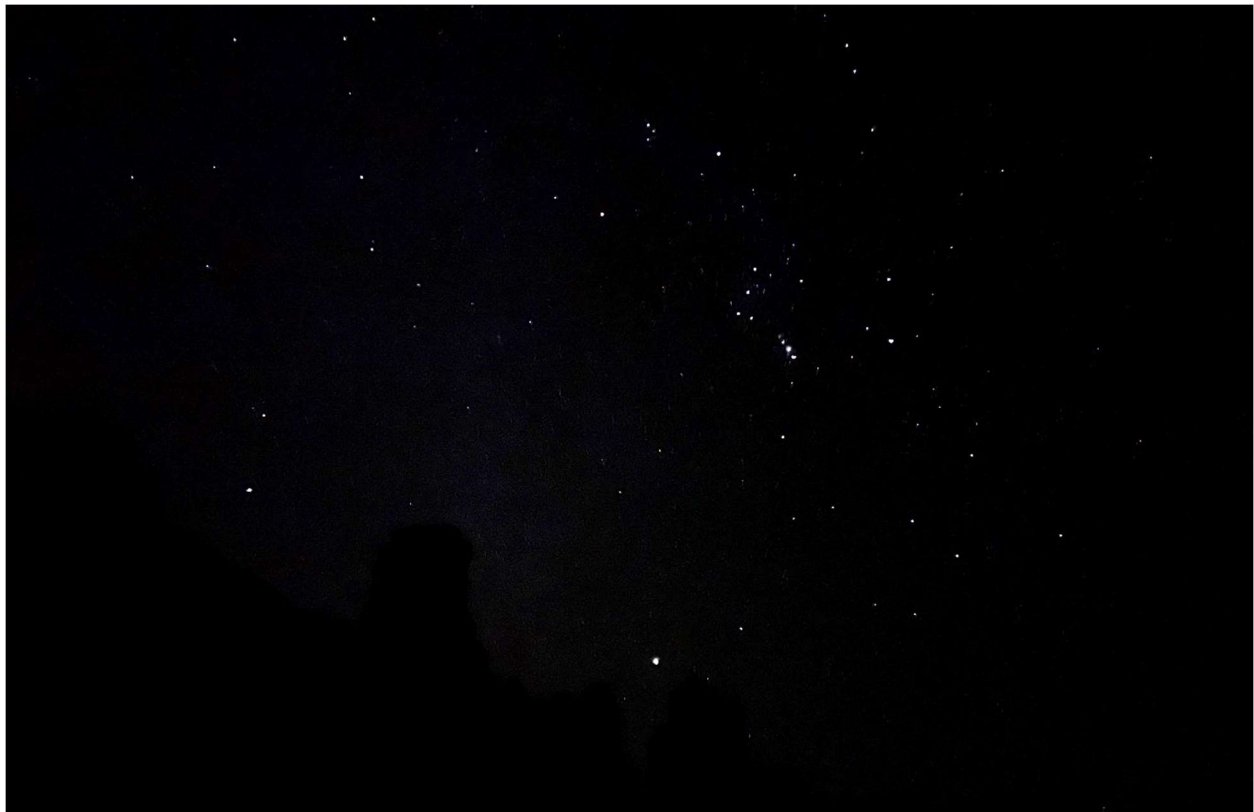
The jackpot shot, though, came when I was looking to the north and, there above the rocky ridge came the flying object. Since I could not identify it, I can call it a UFO. It was most likely an airplane, though, judging by the alternating red and white lights on its extremes. In this totally clear desert sky, the view was vivid. I quickly aimed the tripod and clicked the remote. The UFO crossed out of sight, and I returned to Blue Maxx to see what gems I had gotten.

I downloaded them to my laptop and opened the native Photo app. It was obvious that I had captured an amazing number of stars in each shot, and that I had indeed gotten the Milky Way. But they were actually too bright.

Not a worry, though, because a simple tweaking of a couple of dials (Brightness down, Contrast up, Shadows down) and I was looking at classic astrophotography: thousands of pinpoints of light, with defined dust lanes of the arms of our galaxy. And the UFO had left a clear streak of red-and-white in the lower corner of the frame.

Mannn, was I psyched!!! Never, EVER, would I have thought that a phone could take photos like these.

I went to sleep happy. I woke up, however, around 5:00 AM and took a look out the window. In the eastern sky, just above the silhouette of the towers, was a bright and clear view of Orion the Mighty Hunter, his trademark 3-star belt and sword gleaming



against the jet-black sky. So, I went back at it, setting up a table and tripod inside the van and photographing it through the open screen in the slider door.

This time, however, I did not use the maximum “Night” setting, choosing instead to set it at only about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the max. As a result, I did get darker images, and they were just about as dark as the other ones were after I had tweaked them. They were just a tad too dark, though, so maybe 8 or 8.5 on a 10-point scale might have worked even better. I’m sure that varies from sky to sky or starfield to starfield.

These pics are a long way from the star-trail and Northern Lights photos that true Astro photographers can orchestrate with their tracking tripod and such, but I’m really, really happy about them.

Back to the Rick’s Roads blog:
<http://ricksroads.com/roadblog.html>