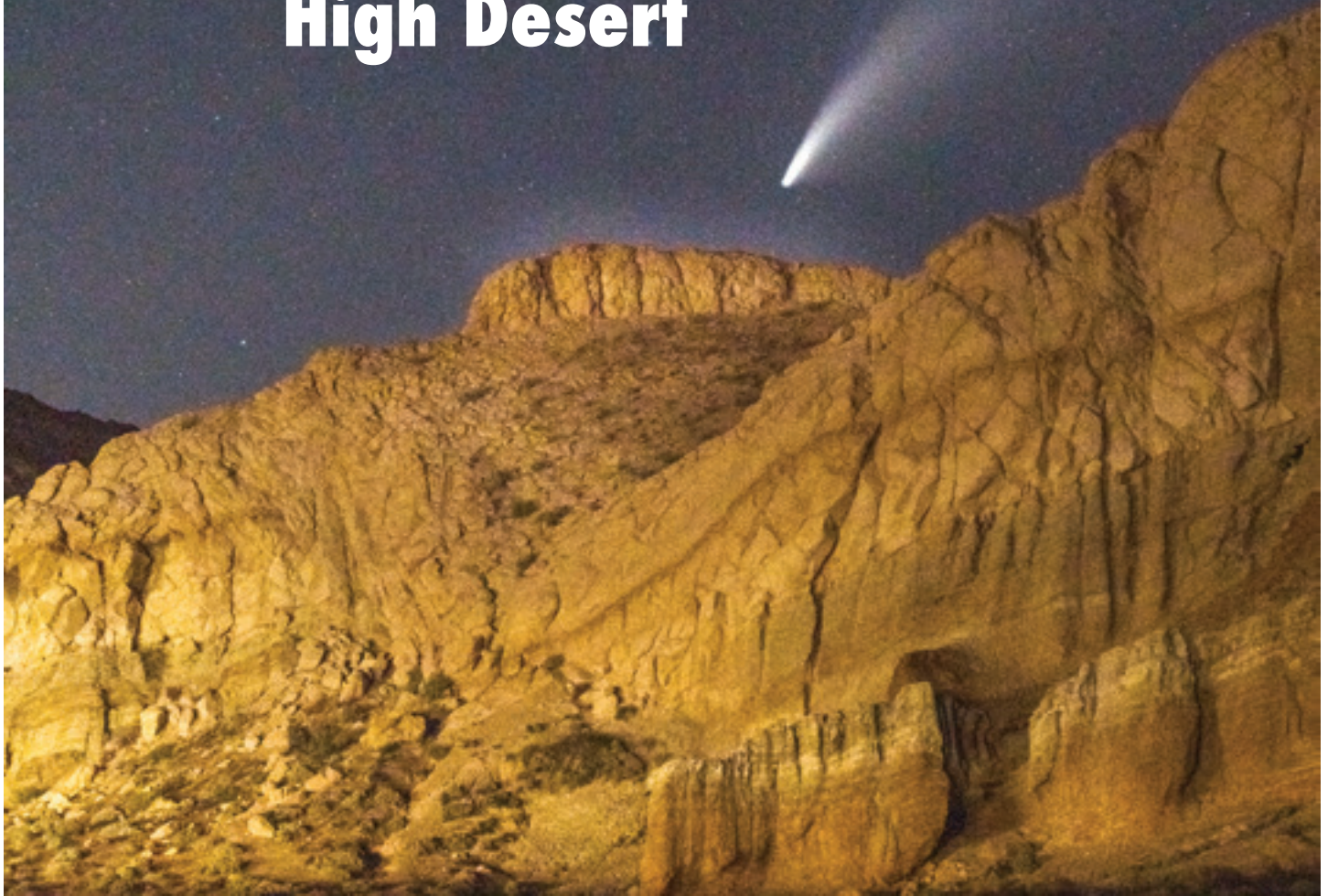


NEOWISE in the California High Desert



NEOWISE at the Red Cliffs

By David and
Christine Wilkins

Photos © David Wilkins
and Christine Wilkins

We were in the midst of the Covid 19 pandemic lockdown when NEOWISE arrived...no travel, no visiting family, no social gatherings, nothing. We were ready for a diversion, but not quite willing to get up before dawn. Finally on the evening of July 13 we went out to look for the comet.

Our first foray was not promising. We could not find the comet in the sky, probably because it was blocked from view by obstructions in the northwest direction. On our way back home we were able to see it from a vacant lot on the outskirts of town. We came back the succeeding two nights and photographed the comet against the city lights and the red glow from the windmill farms. Windmills here have red blinking warning lights for aircraft.

This comet photographing became addicting. The next night we drove north to Red Rock Canyon State Park hoping to incorporate some of the red cliffs into the foreground. Red Rock Canyon State Park is about 100 miles north of Los Angeles and is dark enough to see the Milky Way. The first location we chose in the park was inadequate, but after a short jaunt up the highway to another park area we spotted the comet without binoculars. We rushed to set up and were able to get several pictures. By this trip we were bringing a light to illuminate the cliffs. There was an unexpected bonus to the location. Car and truck headlights from the highway illuminated the cliffs rather well.

We were not satisfied. We discussed where we



NEOWISE up close

could go in the local area to find a more compelling foreground. Over the next eight days we went out five times chasing the perfect shot. The first few days the comet was bright enough to see with the naked eye even inside the city. By the last day (July 24) it was faint enough to be seen only with binoculars even in a place dark enough to see the Milky Way.

Our local camera club took a trip to Devil's Punchbowl County Park, which overlooks the Antelope Valley, where we live. Another evening we traveled to Saddleback Butte State Park to feature the local Joshua trees in our comet shots. We returned to Red Rock Canyon twice more. Since we live in a desert area, there was not a cloud in the sky, so perfect viewing conditions for NEOWISE.



NEOWISE at Red Rock



NEOWISE at the Punchbowl



Comet with Silhouette



Red Cliffs and NEOWISE



NEOWISE Split Tail

We both have Nikon® D850 cameras and found them to be excellent at imaging the comet. One of the strengths of the D850 is the ability to see faint stars in live view and use one of them to focus. We arrived at a focal length of 70mm as optimum for what we wanted to capture and used our 70-200 f2.8 lenses. To avoid star trailing we limited our exposure to 6 or 8 seconds. The ISO had to be up to 6400 for a proper exposure. Noise was present, but manageable. We processed the final images in Lightroom and Photoshop. We did take one series with a Nikon D5 and a 500mm f5.6 lens. Exposure was 1 second at an ISO of 12,800.

The image of the Joshua tree is a composite. The tree was lit with a continuous light and exposed for 25 seconds at f7.1 and ISO 500 to have a sharper image, while still focused at infinity. That was blended with an exposure of the comet for 8 seconds and f2.8 and ISO 3200.

Low earth orbit satellites are showing up more and more in night sky photography. Iridium satellites can flash on and off in shots of the night sky. Space X has launched hundreds of Starlink satellites and they definitely show up. We saw as many as three light streaks from a satellite in one image. These streaks are not readily apparent until the processing stage and you can only hope you got enough shots without the streaks.

We were delighted with our eight socially distanced pandemic outings. ■

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Joshua Tree and NEOWISE



NEOWISE Over the City



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