

Observing Chair Shootout –

Walt's Observing Chairs, StarStep and the StarBucket Observing Chair

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Walt's Custom Observing Chair, StarMaster's StarStep and StarBucket's Observing Chair

I'm a long time observer who was loath to sink money into anything but optics for a long time.

Big mistake.

You shouldn't underestimate the need to be comfortable while observing. It's a well noted fact that you actually see more detail in objects when comfortable, and are far more apt to prolong your observing sessions.

I bought my first observing chair (StarStep) three years ago to help deal with the height of my 10" f7.5 dob, and quickly learned what a boon good support can be. Since then, I've managed acquired two more models. Most recently Walt Geron's Observing Chair joined my platform like StarStep (from Starmaster), and my smaller chair from StarBuckets. Although I really didn't feel I needed another observing chair, once I took a good look I simply couldn't resist. Yes, Walt's chair is that nice.

Before we start, one thing you should know - at 6' 2" and 240+ (ok maybe ++) I'm not the littlest guy in the world, but all three hold me fairly well. Now, let's take a look at all three:



The StarStep (by StarMaster) provides a step up for large dob owners, and will double as a seat – but for wide bodied observers like yours truly, the StarStep leaves a little to be desired in the width (and therefore comfort) department.

The StarStep has a maximum seated height of 31”, a low of 7” and rungs every 6” (a total of 5 positions in all). Overall, its height is 42”. The seat support bars are 1” thick aluminum, and the base at its widest (side to side) is 24 inches. The seat made of 3/4” plywood, can double as a step, in its lowest two positions – and this is where the StarStep really shines. The sides make obvious handles, and the non-slip strips on the seat ensure a sure footing. Additionally its triangular configuration keeps rocking to a minimum. One drawback – make sure that the seat is secure before

placing weight on it – I’ve had it drop out from under me a couple of times. It’s also not as easy to get in and out of when using is as a seat close to the ground. With the other chairs you can just drop off to the side, with this – it’s not an option.

If you’ve got a moderate sized dob (eyepiece height up to around 80”) and just need a 6” to 12” step up – this is the perfect chair. On the down side, if you intend to be seated during much of your session – I’d probably go with one of the others - especially if you are a larger observer.

One other note – it’s really designed for use with Dobs (no surprise given it’s heritage) and in my opinion does not provide a fine enough range of movement for use with other types of scopes. The StarStep is constructed of oak and aluminum and folds completely flat for travel. It also had the best finish of the three, covered in several coats of thick glossy varnish. Screw heads are exposed, but recessed.

At \$139, it’s probably the best choice for dob owners who need a little “step up”.

StarBucket’s Observing Chair (by StarBuckets) is small and portable – a good match for the StarBucket travel scopes, but it’s at it’s limits height-wise when I use it with my TV102 on a Gibraltar or Discmount, and not a good match at all for my 18” scope. The chair travels well and is very lightweight. Changing the height – while it’s not at all difficult, it can be a bit finicky at times – the aluminum rod does not always like to slide into its



slots.

Neil's chair has a maximum height of 29", a low of 13" and slots every 2.5" (a total of 8 positions in all). The seat support bar is ½" aluminum, and the base at it's widest (side to side) is 13 ¼ inches. It can rock a bit when placed on uneven ground, but I never felt this to be a huge issue. Since I ordered mine, Neil has added a support bar to keep the chair from accidentally slipping closed while in use. Using 4 coats of outdoor grade polyurethane, Neil's finish is quite good, but it's not quite as good as the StarStep. Nor does it fold completely flat unless you remove the seat. Screws are recessed but exposed. While the seats aren't padded, a small gardener's knee pad is a perfect match if you feel your posterior needs a bit more cushion.

At \$135, Neil's chair is a great value for small scope owners



Walt's Custom Observing Chair

is constructed of solid red oak, and capable of holding larger observers with style and finesse.

While it's a bit of a climbing act, the upper seat position is at 40.5 inches and will allow me to observe seated while viewing at zenith with my 18" f4.5 Obsession, while with the foot rest removed, the lowest seating position will allow me to comfortably use my 8" Starbucket (which can be quite low to the ground). It's also a perfect match for my 4" TV102. With my 18" scope I can stand on the foot rest or seat in a low slot to get that little jump up, but to be frank, I really didn't feel all that comfortable doing so (of course, I'm not quite as agile as I used to be either) - as it's designed to be, the StarStep is a little better in that regard.

Walt's chair has a maximum height of 41", a low of 9" and slots approximately every 2" (a total of 15 positions in all). The seat support bar is 1" solid oak, and the base at its widest (side to side) is 24 inches.

Walt's seat and foot rest are easily adjustable and ensures that the unit is always at a perfect height – just grab, tilt and slide. The rear bar slides out if/when you need to remove the seat and footrest for travel, but during normal use it does not need to be touched.

Walt coats the red oak with two layers of poly to help protect the oak from the elements, and every screw hole is plugged with red oak plugs. A safety strap keeps the rear leg from moving too far out, and the whole unit collapses flat for storage or transport. The seat and foot rest are easily removed, and the front ground brace is removable for transport. While current units don't really allow the storage of the ground brace and knobs in the chair itself, Walt informs me that future versions will. The weight of the unit is around 23.5 lbs.

While the seats aren't padded, again, a small gardener's knee pad is a perfect match if you need a bit more cushion. About the only thing I would really recommend as a standard addition is non-slip surfaces on the foot rest, but outside of that – the chair's darn near perfect.

The cost is \$200, and in my opinion, worth every penny. This is the only one of the three that can comfortably seat me with all my scopes, and even allows for a "step up" if absolutely necessary. Additionally, while the finish isn't quite as good as the other two, the woodwork is a step above.

My personal favorite has to be Walt's chair, it's easily the best looking and most solid of the three, as well as having the greatest amount of height adjustment, but I'll admit the StarStep is extremely useful when sharing a big dob among folks who might be – well – less athletically inclined.

Which ever chair you go with – take it from an observer who's discovered the importance of comfort – it makes a difference!

Additional Resources:

Walt's Observing Chairs - <http://home.comcast.net/~robowalt2/Chair.htm>

StarBucket's Observing Chair - <http://www.starbuckets.com/obschair.html>

StarMaster's StarStep - <http://www.starmastertelescopes.com/html/chair.htm>

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