

SLEWING YOUR MOUNT IN BELOW FREEZING TEMPERATURES

Updated: 12-24-04 (during a very cold spell)

There are several potential problems when slewing your mount in below freezing temperatures. The symptoms are a wavering or chattering sound from the motors, a slowing down of the slewing with a sudden jolting stop at the end of the slew, and in the worst case, a continuous running of the motors and loss of control. I have seen similar things on my own mounts when the temperature dips below zero F. There are three things that you can look at to alleviate the problem.

First, in cold weather it takes a very much larger amount of power to slew the motors than it does in the summer (see tests I ran below). This extra current drain can cause a voltage drop in the power cord running from the supply to the servo. If you have a long distance between the supply and servo, use a heavy wire to minimize the voltage drop. If the power drops below about 11 volts at the servo terminal, the internal computer chips may reset with subsequent loss of control of the motors. If your supply is marginal, it may also not produce the voltage necessary for proper operation during slews. It is a good idea to limit the slew speed to 600x during real cold weather to reduce the power demand from the supply.

Second, it is very important to have the worm mesh not set overly tight. One symptom of overly tight worm is a chattering sound as the motors try to slew at 1200x or even as low as 600x. You can check to see if the worm turns easily with your finger by removing the motor covers and removing the large spur gear to get access to the worm end. Try turning it by hand. If it does not easily turn, then the motor will also have a difficult time turning it. Check in our technical section of the AP web site on how to set the worm mesh. In real cold weather, well below zero F, it might also be a good idea to lubricate each of the spur gears and their sleeve bearings with a light machine oil. When warmer weather returns, this can be replaced with a light grease, Lubriplate 105, which will reduce the wear factor in warm temperatures.

Third, under very extreme temperature conditions below -20F, it may be necessary to replace the grease on the worm wheel teeth with a lighter material. The mounts use a special formulation of Lubriplate 105 with a damping grease added. This combination is ideal for low wear since the damping grease portion allows the grease to stay on the teeth and not get wiped off by the motion of the worm. Although this combination works well even at temperatures below zero, it does get more viscous in really cold conditions. We have tried straight low temperature greases that work to -80F, and in each case, the worm gears get abraded very quickly. Using no grease at all is also not recommended for a GoTo system that slews at high speeds. The wear on the worm and wheel teeth is extremely high and can develop very high periodic error after a short time due to scratches and high spots that develop on the gear teeth. At this time we have no solution to ultra-low temperatures.

Last night it was -8 F here, and I tested several of our mounts in the observatory. Two are very old, from the original batch, and one is brand new. All worked well at 600x but showed signs of laboring at 1200x slewing. I use a 12-volt marine battery to power them. I replaced the marine battery with a variable power supply that I varied from 12 volts to 18 volts. At 12 volts when both motors were slewing at 1200x, the power draw was in excess of 8 amps (in summer this is around 2.5 amps). The motors were laboring and not running smoothly at full speed. I turned up the voltage to 15 volts, and the current draw dropped to around 5-6 amps. The motors worked smoothly at 1200x with no hesitation at that voltage level. I would recommend for cold weather work to get a supply that can deliver 15 - 16 volts at a rated current capacity of 10 amps. Higher than that is not necessary. Above 18 volts is not recommended.

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