STAR STUFF

The Newsletter of the Ford Amateur Astronomy Club

November 1999
Volume 8 Number 11

☆☆☆ Transit of Mercury November 15 ☆☆☆

IN THIS ISSUE...

SCIENCE NIGHT

by Al Bates
Photos by Al Bates

Once again it's fall, and that means winter is just around the corner. But look at the bright side of it, no more mosquitoes!

In keeping with their fall tradition, the Melvindale Middle School held their Annual Math and Science Night on October 22. The school is trying to get more students, and their families, interested in the fields of math and science. For this program, the students go from room to room and to different places around the school to find clues and resource material to help them complete a work sheet of science and math questions. This year the teachers wanted to include questions about astronomy. My wife Sally asked me if I could set up my telescope so the students could observe the moon for bonus points. Well, my services were augmented by some other club members who helped out. Once again George Korody, with his BIG EYE scope, and Greg Burnett with his pronto and binoculars volunteered to join me with my 11-inch and help introduce the night skies to eager eyes.

The school made a banner for us that read "THE EYE IN THE SKY - THIS WAY." Unfortunately, because of clouds that evening, we had to switch to plan B, Greg's slide show "Astronomy 101." It looked like we had as many interested teachers as students. I saw many teachers picking Greg's brain. (I think that's why he couldn't find his way out to the parking lot. ;-)

The next day I found out that most of the students, parents, and some teachers, had never seen scopes like the ones we displayed. The feedback is, they would love to plan to have the students and their families back for an astronomy night to view the wonders of the universe with the help of our club. It was an exciting time for the students and I know a good time was had by all. ☆

A NEW BEGINNING

by John Ford

How does it feel to be a "newbie" after about 25 years of absence from amateur astronomy? I was fixing to find out this past spring, when Jupiter and Venus greeted each other in the February skies, setting off an old urge to buy a scope and get back into the fray.

A Celestron 8" SCT was thrown from the UPS truck onto my doorstep and the adventure began.

Let's see, gotta remember how to polar align... eyepieces, RA, DEC, hmmm... maybe I should join a club or buy a book. Check! Joined FAAC and bought a few books.

STAR STUFF
is a monthly publication of the Ford Amateur Astronomy Club, an affiliate club of the Ford Employee Recreation Association.

Ford Amateur Astronomy Club
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Your submissions to STAR STUFF are welcome. Please write to the address above or contact the editor...

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Ford Amateur Astronomy Club

Officers:

President	Dan Kmiecik
Vice President	George Korody
Secretary	David Beard
Treasurer	Ray Fowler

General Meetings:
The Ford Amateur Astronomy Club holds regular general meetings on the fourth Thursday of each month (except the combined November/December meeting held the first Thursday of December) at 5:00 PM in conference room 1491 in the Ford Credit building in Dearborn, Michigan.

Observing:
The Ford Amateur Astronomy Club observes at Spring Mill Pond within the Island Lake State Recreation Area near Brighton, Michigan. The club maintains a permit for after-hours access. Weather permitting, the club observes on Friday nights, Saturday nights, and nights before holidays.

Hotline:
Observing schedules and additional club information is available by calling the Observing Hotline at (313) 390-5456.

Club Membership:
Membership in the Ford Amateur Astronomy Club is open to Ford employees and non-employees. Write or call for an application.

Annual -- new: $ 25 renewal: $ 20
Lifetime -- $ 100

Membership includes a subscription to the STAR STUFF newsletter, discounts on ASTRONOMY and SKY & TELESCOPE magazines, after-hours access to the observing site, and discounts at selected area equipment retailers.

OK, next, let's get out to the Island Lake site for some observing. A few clouds, but I don't care, I need to try this thing out. Get out there, set up and look at Venus. WOW! Very nice, but what about a deep sky object! Orion is up, there's supposed to be something there if I recall. Ah! There it is...it is spellbinding! I stare for a half hour. Didn't know you could actually see the structure of the nebula...and so bright! Clouds move in and cover 100% of the sky. I don't want to go home...just been here for 45 minutes! I start feeling very silly sitting alone under a cloudy sky. A lone raccoon walks by and stops. Funny how animals seem smarter than we do sometimes. That pushed me over the edge, so I reluctantly packed and left.

Back home again, I look at the Sky & Telescope monthly star map and saw that the nebula I saw was M42/43. Hmmm....I always wanted to see all Messiers and I heard that there was a certificate or something for seeing them all. Well, I'll start with all those on the S&T map and then go from there.

Next nights out, I searched for a few more Messiers. Bagged a few each night, but it took time to find them and most of them weren't visible in the 6x30 finderscope. I surfed the internet and came across the astronomy newsgroup and I figured out that there is a thing called a Telrad that is far better than the finder. Good, I ordered a Telrad...best forty bucks I ever spent. I can now find anything in minutes. Next night out, I observed about five Messiers in about 3 hours. Next problem, the S&T map was inaccurate for the position of M10 in Ophiuchus. To solve that problem, I ordered a SkyAtlas 2000 and that is the next best thirty bucks I ever spent. Now I can star-hop with authority.

By the time I got my "observing plan" act together, the all-important galaxy cluster in Virgo had sunk close to the horizon and I'd have to wait until next spring to observe those. I guess I'll work on all the others and close in on those last. I found that I could make good use of all the available clear nights to observe since many Messiers are globular clusters or open clusters, still quite visible even in moon light and light pollution. On a few prized moonless nights, I go after the M57 and M27 nebulas, which have become my favorite repeat objects this summer. Also, the "Teapot" region required time and good recognition skills.

After observing all the "evening" objects this summer, I am still short about a dozen objects to get my certificate, so I set my alarm clock for 4:00AM. (Yes, I'm hooked!) The M1, M78, and the Auriga/Gemini clusters fell prey to my early morning sessions. After what seemed to be a obsessive effort, I finally observe M110! At that point, I was over the 70 Messier mark, but I hunted for a few more clusters low on the morning's eastern horizon...M41 and M50, as well as M46, 47, and 48! It's getting the point where I can place the object squarely in the field of view with the Telrad every time! Then one night, I steal a peek through Greg Burnett's Pronto at about 13x...WOW!! I never thought a view like that was possible. Can my SCT do that??

I found a good 2" mirror diagonal for reasonable price, and sold my golf bag of eyepieces to get some good ones. I ordered a Televue 55m and one of the new Nagler T4 22mm eyepieces. Now this is GOOD!!! Went back to all the "hard" Messiers and they had become easy, rich, and bright! Some that I had given up on, where right there in the field of view! It was like having a complete different scope!

Anyway, I was able to push my Messier log to the 80 mark, by logging every available "summer" Messier and I am now about ten percent into my Herschel 400 project.

In retrospect, I look back at the summer and figured I learned a lot, not to mention being able to recognize bits of constellations while driving home after dark and saying things to myself like... "Great! I probably have time to catch NGC7009 before it sets!"

I learned about collimation ...what a world of difference! I can now split the double-double in Lyra with 92x, whereas I used to need over 300x. I learned that magnification is not useful. What IS useful for deep space, is the best quality, lowest power eyepiece you can possibly get your hands on. At both star parties this summer, folks would literally run from my scope to drag friends away from other lineups so they could come see "all the stars so clearly!"

This summer was also the first time I saw Jupiter and Saturn in over 25 years.

I'm back!!! ☆

GOT THE JITTERS?

by George Korody

Does your telescope or binocular mount do the hula every time you change focus or touch the mount in any way, or even in the slightest breeze? Well, a set of Celestron vibration suppression pads is the answer. The pads are about the size of a hockey puck. There is a hard plastic outer shell and a hard plastic inner piece on which the leg of the mount sets. Between these two pieces there is a soft rubber material surrounding the inner piece on the sides and bottom. Apparently this soft material takes up the shock. Interestingly, Celestron recommends that any rubber feet that came with your equipment be removed before placing the mount on the pad. (Note: Some mounts like certain Astro-Physics mounts have very large feet that might not fit on the inner piece.)

I had been seeing advertising claims that these pads could reduce vibrations by 40% to almost 100%. This would be a must have accessory if the claims were anywhere near true. While at the Winter Star Party in Florida two years ago I saw quite a few serious astronomers using the pads. I asked several about their experience with them and three different users all said that they liked them and that vibrations were reduced by about 50%. So, I bought a set of three for $42 from Rex's Astro Stuff, who was on site. I have been using them ever since.
I knew that they helped a lot, but didn't know how much. So, about three months ago I conducted a test using my LX-200 without and with the pads. I repeatedly gave the mount a hard knuckle rap on the side (very severe test). Without the pads it took 10-12 seconds to completely stabilize. With the pads it took 3-5 seconds. This is more than a 60% reduction. With the pads the amplitude was somewhat reduced, but most of the improvement was in how quickly the mount stabilized.

Your experience could be better or worse than this depending on the design characteristics of your equipment. In any case the Celestron vibration suppression pads would seem to be worthy of purchase. ☆

HEARD ON THE NET

by Bob Lambeck

From the sci.astro.amateur newsgroup...

With over 300 messages posted each day, the sci.astro.amateur newsgroup is getting a bit difficult to follow. Recently, John Steinberg thoughtfully provided a summary of the past week's activity which he titled "S.A.A. For The Time Constrained":

"There's an impossibly obnoxious thread about Starry Night Pro. The chief protagonist in this thread is a dentist with an SNP grudge because he claims it screwed up his file associations and evidently is too cheap to license QuickTime.

"He goes on to further vilify the product by stating it was, and I paraphrase, a Mac port. Mac users all over the globe must get a kick out of this as for years they've been subjected to Windoze ports that are just awful. I rate this thread a -18 on the excitement scale. It's barely even amateur astronomy related anymore either. Get over it, doctor!

"Then we have some guy named Ed who represents the AAAAAAAA or something like that. Frankly the various machinations of this club/group is about as exciting as watching paint dry. Take it to private e-mail, kids. It's a waste of bandwidth and your private dealings should be dealt with in private. This one is a -27: Avoid at all costs.

"Brian Tung posted a terrific observing report. Featuring "Opus" the 5" wonder. Read it. It's earned 9.67 (I noticed he splashed a bit on entry.)

"Oh yeah, something about a Home Depot commercial that threatens our dark skies. Copy and paste some noises about taking your business to Lowes, post it to the *[expletive deleted]* Home Depot site, and let's move on. This ones earns a 3.68. Hey, the guy cares and is using his noodle, but there are far bigger fish to fry in this pond.

"Still more noises about the Mars Climate Orbiter. It's a couple of hundred million of our US tax dollars. So what? Congress blows that on junkets every quarter. Stuff happens, just be thankful they weren't working on your Acura at the time. This one gets a 1.5. It's time to get on with your lives!

"There's a bunch more; some ying-yang with a Meade bee in his bonnet, the usual newbie Tuesday questions (always welcome), the 34th discussion this year of using rubylith on your laptop (kill me now!), more Vixen Lanthanum chat than even the folks at Vixen can stand, the light throughput of SCT's - which appears to have ruined some vacation plans, still more chat about the ST80 (oh c'mon, it's just not that good, kids!), More "The Sky is Falling, the Sky is Falling" wacko speculation (hey, how did you bozos miss the Hale-Bopp express train to poolakaville anyway?)

"That's the recap, kids. Here's to hoping next weeks s.a.a. recap will be a little more inspiring.

"Submitted without rancor (and with tongue firmly in cheek). Regards, John Steinberg"

Please visit John's NexStar5 website:
http://members.xoom.com/nexstar
The Unofficial NexStar5 Resource Site
Now Y2K Complacent ☆

FIRST TELESCOPE(S)

by Drew Clark

I've been a star watcher for years. Unlike many of the amateur astronomers I've met lately, I had no "epiphany," no dramatic awareness that the stars where cool. The best I can do is that after the first Apollo landing, I had a huge lunar map on my wall and learned the differences between Mare and Mons.

Last year while taking Cub Scouts camping, I could point out a dozen constellations and a planet or two with confidence, but I realized I wanted to do more. I wanted to *WOW* them with just how impressive the night sky can be. After all, I'd had a chance to show off in front of these kids already and the look they give when you show them something new is apparently addicting. It gives you some sense why teachers do their job for so little pay.

Thus I decided I wanted a telescope to show them "stuff." Just which stuff? Hm... I knew how impressed I was seeing Saturn in a telescope. It's magical, looking at it. My mind just doesn't get past the "Gosh! It really looks like the pictures!" Sure it's tiny, but there's no doubt: the small yellow circle and ring. I think it's unmistakable and unforgettable. A friend had shown me the Ring Nebula a dozen years ago, and I knew that I would love seeing more things like that. This gave me a range. I needed at least to show kids the planets. I was also interested in going beyond that, to "deep-sky" objects, if I could. So I started doing what I usually do at the early stages of enthusiasm. I research stuff on the web.

In the past year, I've accumulated a ton of astronomy bookmarks. I distilled an even larger collection down to ones I continue to find useful. There's enough of those that I put together a web page with other scout leaders as the intended target. Well, it's targeted to them and myself. It contains the basics, things useful for teaching and then other sites for special stuff, like meteors or Messier objects. Hopefully, it's more useful than a bicycle to a fish. Let me know if any of you ever use it or have something you think might be added.

http::/www.mich.com/~aclark/astro.html

Time for a digression. I've done a bit of genealogy and made great progress on most of my lines. The big exception happens to be with the name Clark. My great-grandfather shows up in Northern Vermont in the 1880s and we can't find out where. Clark itself sounds nicely English, but in face he could be Irish or a French-Canadian that wandered too far south. I've a guess he might be Scottish. This would be supported by a tendency to frugality in my family. It was quite a while before I could bring myself to part with the money for the telescope my research told me to buy. I went to the Ryder's Hobby Shop in Canton and bought the Celestron Firstscope 114.

As idiotic as it sounds, I didn't open the box until we had already arrived in Minnesota for a two week vacation at my In-law's cottage under beautifully dark skies. Thus I was crushed to discover I was missing a vital piece, the eyepiece adapter. I assembled the telescope anyway. It was a pretty 3.5" reflector on a wooden tripod with an equatorial mount. As the name "Firstscope" implies, it's a good starter scope. Well, it is good starter scope if it contains all its pieces. A call to Ryder's got them it touch with Celestron and eventually I was assured a replacement piece was on its way. In the meantime I was impatient to begin observing.

An eyepiece adapter is the ring that holds an eyepiece inside the focuser. It's nothing more than a circular piece of plastic so I rigged a few layers of masking tape into a circle thick enough to provide a snug fit. It worked with both the 25mm and 9 mm eyepieces, but it was not easy to quickly change between the two. The phrase "better than nothing" was invented for improvisations such as this!

The next trouble occurred as I was attempting to adjust the 5x24 finderscope. This is the little telescope used to get the bigger telescope pointed in the right general area. Unfortunately, no matter how I tried, it wouldn't adjust far enough to be spot on. Still, I was close, but I soon discovered it wouldn't stay close. No, the slightest bump saw it jump like a frog hearing footsteps.

My review: avoid finderscopes with only one ring bracket. They just don't hold a fine adjustment. The cost difference just doesn't warrant this false economy.

During the next 8 days, I had only three excellent observing sessions. Mars was disappointingly small, but it is working its way to the far side of the sun. Jupiter and Saturn were rising late, so I wasn't going to do any planetary viewing. The great Perseid meteor shower went unseen behind thick clouds as did the partial solar eclipse. All in all, this was an inauspicious beginning. You could almost say "It wasn't in the stars." (Could, but thankfully, I won't.)

Now, unless you're superbly familiar with the night sky, a big telescope without a finderscope as useful as... well, I won't repeat the fish metaphor. That's where I discovered the value of a current issue of Sky and Telescope magazine and a star-hopping guide. I managed to find M11, the Wild Duck cluster and the less impressive M26 cluster. At least, I was seeing something! There is a tremendous sense of satisfaction in tracking down and finding such a target. I was led to these points not because I thought they were the best things in that night's sky, but because I actually had the road map to them.

Note: A good set of star charts are good, but a detailed star hop plan is wonderful. It was the next best thing to having an experienced astronomer at your side.

I drew a few other lessons from the

Firstscope. Telescope tripods are supposed to be rigid, for one. Therefore, don't expect them to easily fold up like a camera tripod. Second, equatorial mounts have heavy counterweights. The whole contraption becomes awkward to drag in and out. These are attributes of this type of telescope and become important because they make the telescope less portable, something I hadn't given sufficient weight when originally shopping.

A third lesson is that 3.5" just wasn't a lot of aperture. This is the measure of light gathering, and I was bitten by aperture fever already. I wanted a telescope that could see beyond this introductory model.

From these points I came to the conclusion I would never be happy with this telescope. I would have to return it and I did. Ryder's was very good about it and I looked at their selection, but I knew I wanted something they just didn't carry. The problems I had certainly weren't their fault. There was little they could do and I'm sorry since they were friendly and helpful. When a friend was looking for a telescope for her husband's birthday last month, I had no qualms recommending she look at what was available from Ryder's. ☆

MEETING MINUTES

by Dave Beard

The October 28, 1999 general meeting of the Ford Amateur Astronomy Club was called to order by President Dan Kmiecik at 5:00pm. There were 42 members and guests present, a new all-time attendance record. Members started immediately on the pizza and pop provided by Vice President George Korody and Bob Fitzgerald. The members introduced themselves and talked about their recent viewing experiences, new equipment, and other stuff.

A thank you note for one of the prizes (a telescope) from the Debolt family (Patty, Matt, Mathew, Ashley, and Sarah) was read to the members.

The Eastern Michigan University Astronomy Club is disbanded for now "officially", but activities are still taking place, and the Scherzer facility is still open Monday nights (clear ones, anyway).

Greg Burnett asked if anyone would be interested in observing asteroid occultations. Please contact Greg at gburnett@ford.com for details. Also, Greg will be teaching a beginning amateur astronomy class next year as part of the Dearborn Adult & Continuing Education Program. A course catalog with detailed info will be available in December.

Nomination forms for the officer's positions were passed out. New rules from FERA state that if there are no Ford employees running for president or treasurer, non-Ford personal may be elected to those positions. If you didn't get a ballot, please e-mail faac1992@hotmail.com with your nominations.

George Korody talked about the Mercury transit occurring November 15th. The South Lyon Municipal Park has been checked out and has an excellent view to the horizon. George talked to Lyon Township officials and we have permission to stay after closing for the event. The park is located on the south side of I-96 between I-275 and US 23. Take the Milford road exit south, take a right (west) turn onto Grand River, the park is located on the north side of Grand River. Go up the hill to the "Tot Lot" for the best view. Remember, the transit starts a few minutes after 4:00pm.

Also, George mentioned that the Leonid "meteor storm" is coming up November 17th and 18th. Every 33 years Earth passes through the tail of comet Temple-Tuttel, so this could be quite a show. The time for the peak would be the evening of the 17th, 9:00pm Eastern time, but will be best from our location just after midnight. The 12th and 13th of December brings us the Geminids.

The Treasurers report:
$1236.68 in checking, $1111.59 in savings, and of these amounts, $756.89 is earmarked for the scholarship fund.

New business: The third annual FAAC dinner party is currently scheduled for March 25th, location TBD. ☆

1999 Ford Amateur Astronomy Club Calendar

FAAC, P.O. Box 7527, Dearborn, MI 48121-7527

Nov 6	Lake Hudson Dark Sky Stargaze
Dec 2	FAAC Joint November/December General Membership Meeting <<<<<<< !!!!!!!!!!!
Dec 11	Lake Hudson Dark Sky Stargaze

Check for updates on the FAAC hotline: 313-390-5456
Also check out these WEB sites: Ford Intranet: http://www.be.ford.com/astro/faac.html
External Internet: http://kode.net/~dougbock/faac/

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