FIRST LIGHT

Autumn is upon us, and with it, the beautiful fall skies, not to mention some great star parties. Here we have several reports from end-of-summer star parties and some final looks at the splendors in the summer skies.

To all of the sciastro-ites that weathered Hurricane Georges, we hope you all made it through the storm in one piece; we know many of you got plenty of rain and wind (your editor was very lucky, at least this time) and its accompanying misery. Hope things are drying out now.

BYTES AND PIECES

Voyager24, algenib, Astrosetz, and CosmicOne all attended AstroFest in Kankakee, IL, this year. There was a huge crowd, a veritable mall of vendors, and two nights of pretty decent observing.

A whole crowd of sciastro-ites made it to the Great Plains Star Party the weekend after AstroFest, in Kansas. The group included AstroSetz, rickstr, RADD, teledat, CosmicOne, amsup88, Portia, and AstroCady. A group shot of this motley crew, in front of Astrosetz's 22" StarMaster, appears below. Your editor heard much complaining from the subjects about how fat they looked and how far their stomachs protruded - and it wasn't the women, it was the MEN!!! Well - do what we have to do, guys - suck it in!! Or call Jenny Craig. :)

In answer to the growing number of inquiries regarding the Winter Star Party, please see the Southern Cross Astronomical Society website at http://scas.org At this time there are no plans to change the location, despite Hurricane Georges somewhat unhospitable visit.

This year's Giacobinids (also referred to as the Draconids) may be worth watching. This shower radiates from a point near the head of Draco and are the result of P/Comet Giacobini-Zinner, which is now in its 13th observed apparition. For more information, see http://skypub.com/meteors/giacobinids98_preview The date has been variously reported as either the evening of October 8 or 9. The nice part about this shower is that unlike many others, it happens during evening hours, right after sunset. Although there will be a fair amount of moon, the shower is in the north, which helps also. So get those cameras out, folks! Let's see if we can get some meteor shots in our next newsletter issue!

And while you're getting ready for meteor showers, get ready for the Leonids! The Japanese intend to televise the Leonids live, from an aircraft flying over Okinawa. North America is not well placed for the peak storm activity, so you can see the storm live via the 'Net at http://leonids.net/live on the afternoon of November 17th, the projected time period for the storm. The site is presently under construction. You will also be able to view this live telecast via NASA-TV.

#sciastro t-shirts are still available. For ordering information, see the #sciastro website! And remember - money from t-shirt sales support this website. So order one today!

STAR PARTY REPORTS

MONTANA STAR WATCH 98

BY CARBON_WA

After attending the Table Mountain Star Party last year, my wife and I were looking for a slightly less crowded event this year. We found exactly what we were looking for at the Montana Starwatch. This event is held at Ruby Reservoir seven miles south of the town of Alder. (Don't blink or you will miss Alder). Although the official dates for the star party were August 21&22, we arrived on Monday the 17th. Getting first shot at the campsites is always a plus. The site is about 5000ft above sea level and I would estimate the skies to be about 6th magnitude naked eye. The seeing was a little soft but still very nice.

When we arrived on Monday there was one other astronomer there named Hazel. Hazel is from Arizona and is an amazing lady with only 40 odd objects left to observe on the Herschel list. She has a 20" truss tube dob and attends quite a few star parties around the country. If you are lucky you just might meet her some day.

The weather for the entire week was very hit and miss. Every morning was just perfect but around ten or eleven oclock every day the wind started blowing. Not just a mere breeze but nearly gale force winds that would not let up until at least sundown. The winds were accompanied by some very serious looking clouds; however we lucked out and all but two storms passed us by. The storm on Tuesday was the worst with rain falling horizontally in buckets!! I hate it when that happens! I was told by a Montana native that the reason why the wind is so bad in Montana is because "Idaho blows and North Dakota sucks". That comment took my mind off of the wind for about three seconds.

The first four nights were clouded out for the most part so everyone gave up early and went to bed. On Thursday, Erik Strang and Paul Wicklund arrived. Friday and Saturday, (the official star party nights) the astronomy gods smiled on us. One of our first targets was Comet Mernier-Dupouy. This little fuzzball eluded us on Friday but with a little help we finally caught the 11th magnitude comet on Saturday. Friday was the best of the two nights and it will stick in my mind forever due to the fact that I was able to show Eric two objects he had never seen before. The first was NGC 2. It happened while he was showing me NGC 1 and I happened to notice an even fainter glow very close to NGC 1. The second object was NGC 7492, a large but faint globular cluster. Anyone who knows Eric will understand that being able to show him something new is not the easiest of tasks. Thanks "professor".

On Saturday I got set up to do some astrophotography but as soon as I was ready to go the wind picked up. My G-11 mount is rock solid even in the wind but I figured it would be better to just observe. There is no point investing 30 minutes into an hour long exposure only to have the wind get worse, right? Debbie and I did the tour guide routine for a couple hours for some of the "newbies". After that we observed several other faint fuzzies.

On both friday and Saturday we were treated to a wonderful auroral display. Starting around midnight each night a glow would appear on the northern horizon which would gradually intensify. This was followed by large spikes and moving curtains of faint light that stretched from the handle of the big dipper to the eastern horizon below Perseus. The spikes and curtains would eventually fade out to be replaced by an even brighter more intense display. The show lasted well into twilight each night.

This was the best display I have ever seen but I was told by others who had seen more auroras that this was a mild display. All I can say to that is if I ever see a better show my heart might not be able to take it. Eric Strang and I set up our cameras and burned through film as fast as we could. Out of 84 exposures I made, I got about six that were good enough to enlarge to 8x10's.

All things considered, Montana Starwatch is an event I will be returning to. Mike Murray and his group did a great job organizing this event and I'm sure it will continue to grow.

TABLE MOUNTAIN STAR PARTY

BY STARGAZR

The Table Mountain Star Party is now a memory of 3 hot days and 3 beautiful nights. We arrived at the mountain Thursday morning around 11:00 am. We had stayed in Ellensburg the night before. As we arrived we were greeted by hundreds of tents, campers, RV’s, cars, and people. As we parked next to vendor row I jumped out of the car with excitement. We pulled my scope out of the car and set it next to the RV.

I wandered down to the telescope field. I stepped up to a brand new 18" Starmaster, when Sealth came by. That’s when I met Sealth, who was taking delivery of this beauty at the star party. As I walked down the vendor row I saw dozens of people looking at the telescopes and accessories (I must have blown most of my money the first day). They had a scope set up for people to look at the sun, with a hydrogen alpha filter. I was able to see several flares, and a couple sun spots. During the day I also met a few more of the sci-astro users.

The TMSP Association people went around saying there was a dry lightning warning; it swung east of us, but we saw a fire that sprung up from the lightning. As sunset approached people started to walk to the meal wagon to get their grub. As darkness approached I saw hundreds of telescope silhouette’s all over the field. The Milky Way stretched from horizon to horizon, and billions of stars. Jupiter came up around 11:00, and Saturn around 12:30. Friday was very similar to Thursday. A few more vendors came that day, including the Sky & Telescope booth. Several talks were given, and another beautiful night came again.

Saturday came and that meant the Swap Meet. Everyone lined up behind the rope at 10:30 then rushed as soon as they said go. People chatting, and negotiating prices. I walked around the telescope field several times, getting pictures of them (which I am posting on my web page). At around 4:00 people started heading over, to the other side of the food wagon, beside the Star-B-Que tents for the drawing. While I didn’t win anything there were several nice prizes given away. Anacortes Telescope and Wild Bird donated over 1,000 dollars worth of stuff, and they weren’t even there. After that people started heading for the Star-B-Que. We headed back to our RV (We brought our own dinner). Once again dark came and another spectacular night was upon us. I knocked off a few more Messier objects; total over all three nights I got 25 (Thursday I didn’t look at too many new objects). I observed Jupiter and Saturn through my new eyepieces, spectacular, especially with the 6mm. I stayed up until 3:30 am, then went to bed, then woke up at 6:30am, (I should have just stayed up the whole night) then headed down the mountain. I had the most wonderful time, and I can’t wait till next year. Clear Skies to all!

GREAT PLAINS STAR PARTY

BY PORTIA

It was on, it was off, it was on, the boss said no, and finally, two weeks before the star party it was ON! We decided we had better pack up before somebody changed their mind again, and off we went, on a 1340 mile sojourn to southeastern Kansas and the Great Plains Star Party.

We left home Friday evening at approximately 6:00 p.m. and drove round the clock. Guess who got the midnight to 8:00 a.m. shift, complete with road construction? I think Tennessee and Kentucky bought out every single orange barrel and cone that they could find. We arrived on Saturday afternoon at the Singmaster house, and StarMaster factory. After being given the grand tour of the new building, Rick (rickstr) and Carol (starmrs) fed us and we got out a 14.5" scope that Rick wanted to star test before shipping. Although I crashed early due to lack of sleep the night before (I wonder why!) rickstr and AstroCady stayed up late for some spectacular views of Jupiter and Saturn, as well as the deep-sky delights in Sagittarius.

On Sunday morning, the rain began. It rained, and it rained.... and it rained. A total of 14" of rain fell on Ft. Scott, KS, on Sunday, producing the second worst flood in recorded history. The rain came courtesy of Tropical Storm Frances, which we had left Florida to avoid. Needless to say, there was no way we were going to get to Scopeville, the site of the star party, on Monday. Every road out of Ft. Scott was closed, except the road out of town heading south. Since Scopeville was north, it made more sense to stay put at rickstr's than to see if we could get an ark built overnight.

It was Wednesday by the time we got to Scopeville, an 18 acre private observing area owned by a group of astronomers from the Kansas City area. The site, located in the Flint Hills, is nice and dark, and beautifully maintained by the club who owns it, KAOS (Kansas Astrophotographers and Observers Society). Up went the tent, the AstroPugs were cut loose from their lines, and out came the scopes. There were already several others set up, and the evening's observing began. That night, and the next, reminded us of Florida skies in the summer; rock-steady but lousy transparency. Time to pile on the barlows and pump up the power!!! We had Jupiter in our 18" at 924x, and rickstr had the power up to 1145x in another 18" StarMaster that had the StarDrive on it. The next two nights were spent oogling at Jupiter and Saturn in excruciating detail; we even saw detail on the Galilean moons. The dark area on Ganymede was readily apparent! And I saw Triton!!! for the first time ever! Unbelievable.

The transparency improved Friday and Saturday night, and I was finally able to get in some deep-sky observing, which is what I'd come to Kansas for anyway. With all due respect to planetary observers, I a) can get steady skies just about any time in Florida and b) am most assuredly not a planetary observer. It was time to go after the faint fuzzy stuff!

On Saturday afternoon the winners of the club's AstroTrivia contest, held every year, were announced. teledat, amsup88, and I worked on much of the quiz together, but managed to talk ourselves out of several correct answers and wound up all tying, with two other people, for first place. Next year we've decided to adopt the philosophy that the obvious answer is often the correct one. No more second guessing!

We packed up early Sunday morning, after four days of staying up late, swapping lies, and in general, having a ball. Even the AstroPugs had fun; aside from the

fight that Portia (the dog) picked with another dog, they actually acted like they had decent manners most of the time. At times we wondered if someone had taken our dogs, and substituted dogs that had actually been trained...

We arrived home Monday evening, to unpack and get ourselves cleaned up - only to have to repack everything and haul it to safety, because of Hurricane Georges. But we escaped unscathed, for the most part, and are looking forward to Great Plains again next year. Hats off to the KAOS members for hosting yet another smashing success! More pictures from the Great Plains star party can be found on AstroCady's website at http://sciastro.net/carrolls Select the star party link.

NOTE TO STEVE: PLEASE USE THE PHOTO AND CAPTION ON YOUR STAR PARTY WEB SITE OF THE GROUP. THEN DELETE THIS LINE!!!!

CRAWLING THE WEB

BTFriend has just completed construction of his Sunflower Observatory near Olathe, KS. Take a look at pictures at http://members.tripod.com/~Astro9/sunflowr.html

Take a look at the "Today In History" page of Scope Systems website. It's at http://www.scopesys.com/today

The Hubble Space Telescope Catalog of Galaxies is located online at http://astro.phys.cmu.edu/mds/ Wonderful resource!

Don't know your exact latitude and longtitude? Try the Tiger Map Server website. You can get exact coordinates of any place in the US, based on census. NOTE: it does NOT include unincorporated place names! However, you can put an "X marks the spot" on a map to pinpoint your exact location. Go to http://tiger.census.gov:80/ and click on "map".

Another great site for obtaining coordinates is MapBlast! at http://mapblast.com/mapblast/start.htm

Yet another wonderful site for satellite information, from beginner to very comprehensive, is http://www.satellite.eu.org/sat/vsohp/satintro.html Do check this one out!

Looking for free planetarium software? Try MIRAPLA at http://www.sira.it/msb/eng.htm The program is only 130k.

There has been much in the media lately about the fate of SETI and whether or not it should be continued, and on what level. Your editor ran across this site that has, among other things, an interactive page in which you can use the Drake Equation to figure how many potential life-bearing planets with communicating civilizations there may be out there. Go to http://www.msnbc.com/news/spacelife_front.asp

Want to view launches from Vandenburg AFB? Try http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/rawhide_home_page/

Nightskies: The Art of Deep Space - A virtual exhibition by David Malin - is a beautiful collection of Malin's images. It can be found at http://www.aao.gov.au/local/www/dfm/ex_layout.html

Want to build your own Dob? Check out M13's website at http://www.arrowweb.com/m1/atm/

StarDate Online is a publication of the University of Texas and McDonald Observatory. A great resource! http://stardate.utexas.edu/magazine/

Spaceviews, another online publication of space exploration issues, is available at http://www.spaceviews.com You can subscribe free of charge.

Here is a really nice 3-D starmapping site: http://spacsun.rice.edu/~twg/lism.htm It contains 3-D mapping of the Local Interstellar Medium. Want to know where we are in the galaxy, and just how insignificant we look? Check this out. Another great site for 3-D starmaps and programs is http://www.clark.net/pub/nyrath/starmap.html This site even has the Gliese Near Star Catalog, along with some great links.

PHOTO GALLERY

Here are some of the latest efforts from our shutterbugs on #sciastro. This is a particularly spectacular collection - keep 'em coming, folks!

Todd took these lovely images of Jupiter and Saturn on August 10. Todd's CCD images of Jupiter appear on either side of an image by Don Parker; they were taken using an MX5C One-Shot color CCD through a 5.1" edf A/P at exposure times of .3 sec. The image of Saturn was done with the same setup, but with a .9 sec exposure.

Here are two pictures of ngc6960's homemade tripod for his Meade ETX. Beautiful work! Just to show you how well it works, here is a shot of the moon, taken at prime focus of the ETX. Unfortunately, your lame excuse for an editor forgot to ask ngc about the film and exposure time on the moon shot.

Here are two pictures StarGazr took at the Table Mountain Star Party. The first is a shot of Saturn taken at prime focus of a 10" f/10 LX-50, using 400 ISO film and a 45 second exposure. In the second picture StarGazr was assisted by his father; it is a shot of the sky shortly after sunrise, with the Pleiades evident above the trees. They used a 35mm camera with a 49mm lens and a 20 second exposure on ISO 400 color negative film for the shot. Lovely!

Here is a group shot of Losmandy (second from left) and a group of fellow observers getting ready for the solar eclipse in February of 1998.

This is a shot ed_turco took of a particularly lovely sunset. ed used a 400mm telephoto lens working at f/5.6, 200 ISO film, and a 1/250th sec exposure to capture the setting sun, with a bird in the foreground.

Here are two CCD images taken by Flash-CA. The first is of M33, the Pinwheel Galaxy, and was a composite of 5 45-second exposures, using a 4" Takahashi working at f/6.4 and an ST-7 CCD camera. The second is of M31, the Andromeda Galaxy, and is a composite of 15 45-second exposures, using the same scope/camera setup.

Here are three pictures Carbon-WA took at the Montana Star Watch. The first two are gorgeous shots of an auroral display during the star party. They were both taken using an Olympus OM-1 on a tripod, with a 50mm f/1.8 lens, Fuji SuperG 800 and 30 second exposures. The third is a picture of M45, The Pleiades. It is a

35-minute manually guided exposure taken at prime focus of an 80mm f/6.25 refractor, using Fuji SuperG 800 film.

This is an image neptunium took of NGC 2024, a.k.a. the Flame Nebula in Orion. This is a composite of 3 20-second exposures through a 45 cm Newtonian working at f/5.4, with an AP-7 CCD camera. Copyright 1998 by Gordon J. Garradd.

This picture of STS-91 and Mir was taken by Dave-J from his location in Chicago, IL. The Shuttle and Mir are passing over Chicago in June, for the last time. The picture was taken at approximately 7:00 p.m. through a 28mm lens. The reflection artifact to the right is from a streetlight.

And finally, here is a lovely portrait of Portia and AstroCady that TBare sent in. Right on the mark!

Been to a star party or an observing session lately? We want to hear about it! Send your star party reports, observing reports, and photos or images to the editor of First Light at portia@sciastro.net For photos or images, we need a) the equipment used b) the exposure time c) the film type and speed, where relevant, and d) copyright information where applicable. For reports, please submit them in plain .txt format. For all submissions, we need your IRC nick on #sciastro.