The Amazing Messier Marathon of 2002

Peter Eschman

Wonderful weather helped to bring over 60 people to GNTO to enjoy this year’s Messier Marathon. In addition to the always-enjoyable Messier objects, this year also offered a treat of four comets, several of which were quite spectacular. The four comets included Ikeya-Zhang (C/2002 C1), Snyder-Murakami (C/2002 E2), Utsunomiya (C/2002 F1), and LINEAR (C/2000 WM1). Since we scheduled this event for later in the year than we have in years past, we had a different set of unavailable Messier objects. This year’s impossible finds included M33, M74 and M77, all of which were too low in the evening twilight to be detected. On the plus side, M30 was easier to catch in the early morning light than it has been in previous years.

We benefited greatly from some excellent charts and checklists prepared by Barry Spletzer. Barry also was on hand to mentor some of the new comers to the marathon. Barry helped numerous folks identify objects and plan viewing strategies through the course of the night. Barry waited until well after his last “mentee” packed up before he packed up his own equipment. Barry also took some great panoramic photos of the event. Barry’s photos, along with some other wonderful event photos by Larry Cash, Nancy Davis, and Sammy Lockwood can be found on the TAAS web site.

In fact, the 2002 Messier Marathon is currently featured on the first page of the TAAS web site (http://www.taas.org), but just in case the first page changes, here is the specific web page: http://www.taas.org/events/mm2002/index.html. Thanks to Sammy (our hard working webmaster) for getting this great coverage up on the web. Bill Tondreau also did an excellent set of panoramic photos of the event, and Bill’s work can be found on his web site at http://www.kupercontrols.com/nmastro/gntom2002.htm.
Once again it is Saturday afternoon and I am pushing another deadline for this column (do I detect a pattern in this?) Our first Oak Flat star party of the season is a few hours away, and I can see the clouds gathering. Speaking of patterns, someone should investigate how many years TAAS events in the Manzano Mountains have been catalyzing monsoonal activity? I have often enjoyed the spirit of fellowship and eternal optimism as we stand and survey the clouds for holes or local thinning. (“There – wasn’t that Arcturus?”) With the current horrendous draught, however, I would be far more pleased to have a true gully-washer – if we are not to enjoy clear skies and calm air.

Another school year is drawing to a close: several hundred joyous and confident Seniors graduated from Valley yesterday, three TAAS members among them. Another roomful of Astronomy students have traveled from Earth to the edge of the observed universe, and I am confident that many will book return passage eventually. I will miss so many of these companions – the shift to summer’s indolence is not one of unalloyed joy for me. There is real sadness in these departures, even as I prepare to let 150 strangers help me push back the frontiers of knowledge. Of course there is some solace in planning the next campaign, reflecting on the lessons that worked and the lessons that made time stand still.

I feel very fortunate in this work I do. There are immense rewards when I listen for the confirmatory “Aha!” and (such a rarity in Physics) “It worked!” All learning is transformational, I know, but Physics and, more particularly, Astronomy seem to me to be two introductory subjects that have the greatest chance of being life-altering. We who enjoy astronomy take continuing the greatest chance of being life-altering.

Some of what they take from Astronomy is predictable. So much more gives me fresh insights into why it is that I teach. The following extracts were written by Seniors several weeks ago.

“The biggest idea that I have taken from Astronomy is the idea that we are indeed part of the universe. That idea had never occurred to me before. I had always thought of myself as being on the outside looking in.”

“My ideas seem incomplete because, in fact, they are! I will spend my whole life contemplating the questions and ideas that I have only just begun to process.”

“I find myself telling people interesting things that I learned earlier in the day. I have a sense of knowledge lying deep within my brain that amazes even myself. Even though there are obstacles in the path of understanding this science fully, I am committed to stomping them flat by continuous work. I just hope that I can continue into this field after college.”

“I took this course initially for the sake of education and the teacher. I take from this course a highly evolved set of questions. I’ve learned many things of scientific value, but those will stay with me at best for the next few years. The true treasure that I leave this course with is the sense of a Universe that is infallible.”

“I think we protect our own existence for the same reason that we protect the white tiger or the panda bear. We may be endangered in a Universe that favors star matter over brain matter. Our unique position, and circumstances that are able to harbor life, may be a rarity in an indifferent Universe. So we strive to save our own existence through our ability to understand ourselves, and the more we understand about ourselves, the more significant we become.”

“This subject is important not only because we learn the physical aspects of the universe, but because we are able to connect with them. We are able to gain a sense of belonging and unity, and back it all up with scientific evidence.”

“Often I have said jokingly that ‘Science is the new God.’ Much to my chagrin I have found that I am mostly right, although my statement was lacking four key words: ‘Science is the new way of looking at God.’ The realization that accompanied this revision was a great one. No longer do I believe that God and science are fighting one another. On the contrary, I now see that they are one and the same.”

“So we come back to the original question: why study astronomy. Because by learning about the Universe we learn about God and ourselves.”

I am unspeakably proud, of course. These students give me a sense that our species is hardly as doomed as, in my darkest moments, I might otherwise be led to believe. To the foregoing I can do no better than to add: “Aha!” and “It worked!”

I suppose there may be those who scan the President’s Message for something in verse, and they should not be disappointed. What more fitting tribute to these wonderful graduates than a rousing stanza of Gaudeamus Igitur. In Latin, I’m afraid, though it was a popular German university song from the 18th century on. As a kindness, I will provide an English translation.

Gaudeamus Igitur
Therefore while we are young, Juvenes dum sumus
Let us rejoice!

Gaudeamus Igitur
Therefore while we are young, Juvenes dum sumus
Let us rejoice!

Post molestam senectutem After a pleasant youth Post molestan sexentutem After a troublesome youth Nos habebit humus. The earth will have us. Nos habebit humus. The earth will have us.

As a further kindness, here is a somewhat less doleful translation with, it must be mentioned, no great fidelity to the original!

For companions near us! Jubilation now resound For our youth to cheer us!

For our youth to cheer us!

After youth, the bold, the airy,
Age advances cautionary. Quiet then will hold us,
Quiet earth will enfold us.
June 1, 2002 General Meeting Preview

Saturn or Bust

I wish I could take credit for the June 1 meeting program, but all the kudos go to Neil Goldberg. Originally planned as one of our two TAAS/Lodestar evenings of the year, the meeting will now be held at Regener Hall, due to an unexpected facility scheduling conflict at Lodestar.

We are very fortunate to have as a speaker NASA JPL Solar System Ambassador Leonard Duda. Dr. Duda has a PhD in physical chemistry and is a working scientist at Sandia National Labs. In addition, he is President of Explora Science Center and secretary of the New Mexico Space Society.

Dr. Duda’s topic will be the Cassini voyage to Saturn, and he will give a mid-course report on the mission and the planned rendezvous with Titan, Saturn’s largest moon. Cassini will reach Saturn in July of 2004 and six months later will begin its probe of Titan.

If you’re a Saturn lover (and who isn’t?) you won’t want to miss this opportunity to get the inside track on Cassini. Nor will you want to miss the chance to graze at the refreshment bar and get social with your fellow TAAS members. If you’re a new member, this is a great opportunity to find out all that the club has to offer and to pump our seasoned observers for information. I hope to see you there.

The General Meeting starts at 7:00 PM. Regener Hall is located on UNM’s Main Campus, west of Popejoy Hall. For more information, contact Karen Keese at pr@taas.org or 261-0040.

TAAS General Meeting News

Karen Keese

Highlights of the April 27 General Meeting

What do a career parole officer from Chicago, a mental health professional from Washington State, and an astrophysics student from Utah have in common? Well, in addition to having been our speakers at the April 27 meeting, they have in common their love for a magical place called Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

We were 90 strong at the April general meeting, turning out in force to welcome our friends, new and old, from Chaco. G.B. Cornucopia is a veteran of TAAS General Meetings, having presented to us on archeoastronomy in the past, and John Sefick is known to many of us through his astro-photography and his generous support of both GNTO and the Chaco Observatory.

G.B. cautioned that archeoastronomy is more an art form than a science and that different results are achieved based upon the different methodologies used and the different research questions asked. Although the sites at Chaco appear to reflect a keen interest in the sky and celestial events, precisely how they were used with respect to astronomy remains a mystery, because the ancient Chacoans left no written records. We can safely say that close examination of the structures at Chaco and their orientation to the sun and the moon, and particularly to the winter solstice, reveals a long list of intriguing and compelling coincidences. G.B. described in detail some of the archeoastronomical features that are found at Pueblo Bonito, Fajada Butte, and other sites in the Park. He also presented slides of the construction of Chaco. G.B. Cornucopia is a veteran of TAAS General Meetings, having presented to us on archeoastronomy in the past, and John Sefick is known to many of us through his astro-photography and his generous support of both GNTO and the Chaco Observatory. A fresh new face was provided by Angie Richman, who is finishing up her undergraduate degree in astrophysics at UNM and who is heavily involved in the dark-sky research project underway at Chaco.

Continued on Page 12
June 2002

Sunrise/Sunset
6/1 04:55/19:17
6/15 04:53/19:24
6/30 04:57/19:26

Planet Rise/Set (6/15/2002)
Mercury 03:47/17:31
Venus 07:33/21:52
Mars 06:05/20:38
Jupiter 06:45/21:06
Saturn 04:36/18:53
Uranus 23:13/10:06
Neptune 22:11/08:32
Pluto 18:10/05:01

1 • TAAS General Mtg, 7 P.M. Regener Hall

2 • Last Quarter @ 18:06

3 • Last Quarter @ 18:06

4 • ATM Workshop 7 P.M., Valley HS

5 • ATM Workshop 7 P.M., Valley HS

6 • UNM

7 • UNM

8 • GNTO Chaco Canyon

9 • New Moon @ 17:47

10 • New Moon @ 17:47

11

12

13

14 • UNM

15 • oak flat

16 • First Quarter @ 18:29

17 • First Quarter @ 18:29

18 • ATM Workshop 7 P.M., Valley HS

19 • ATM Workshop 7 P.M., Valley HS

20 • GNTO Committee Mtg

21 • UNM

22

23 • Full Moon @ 15:42

24 • Full Moon @ 15:42

25

26

27 • Board Meeting (7 P.M., PandA Bldg.)

28 • UNM

29 • TAAS General Mtg, 7 P.M. Regener Hall

30

Astronomical Events

• June 3, 17:00: Venus 1.6° North of Jupiter.

• June 21, 07:23: Summer solstice. The Sun, appearing to travel along the ecliptic, reaches the point where it is farthest north of the celestial equator. so days are longest and nights shortest ( other way around for the southern hemisphere).
### July 2002

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<td><em>New Moon @ 04:26</em></td>
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<td><em>Full Moon @ 03:07</em></td>
<td><em>Board Meeting (7 P.M. @ PandA Bldg.)</em></td>
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**Planet Rise / Set (7/15/2002)**
- Mercury 04:26/18:54
- Venus 08:26/21:36
- Mars 05:40/19:53
- Jupiter 05:19/19:33
- Pluto 16:05/03:00
- Saturn 02:53/17:12
- Uranus 21:13/08:05
- Neptune 20:11/06:30

**Notes**
- **TAAS General Meeting**
  - Saturday, June 1, 2002  7P.M.
  - Regener Hall - UNM
  - Subject: **Cassini Voyage to Saturn**
  - Speaker: Leonard Duda, PhD

**ATM Workshop**
- Ray Collins/Mike Pendley
- atm@taas.org

The Amateur Telescope Making workshop is now in operation. The workshop meets the first and third Wednesdays of each month at Valley High School, 1505 Candelaria—the north side of Candelaria, just west of 12th street. The meetings begin at 7 P.M. and are in Building E, Room #3.
Minutes of The Albuquerque Astronomical Society Board of Directors meeting, 25 April 2002, Physics and Astronomy Building, The University of New Mexico:
President Ray Collins called to order the Board of Directors at 7 P.M. Attending members were the president, Karen Keese (vice president), Dave Brown (treasurer), David Blair (secretary), Eric Bucheit, Larry Cash, Pete Eschman, Neil Goldberg, Dan Richey, Barry Spletzer, Absent were Judy Stanley and Chris Wilson. David Beining, director of the Lodestar Astronomy Center, and Society members Barry Gordon, and Mark Kroska were also present. Minutes of the 28 March meeting were amended to reflect the absence of Board member Eric Bucheit from that Board meeting.

Public Relations Standout
Ray opened the meeting by commending Karen Keese for the “quality and extent” of her public relations efforts on behalf of TAAS. Circulated to the Board were copies of a 25 April Albuquerque Journal article by John Fleck, science writer. The article was based on a 19 April meeting that Karen had arranged among Fleck and TAAS members rehearsing for the Five Planets event. Ray also read a note from TAAS member and founder Robert Kyrlach, thanking the Society for extending permanent membership.

Treasurer’s Report
Dave reported on the following funds—checking account funds, $6144.75 (up $945.35 from the previous month); savings account funds, $1,208.64 (up $0.10 from last month); total funds on deposit, 7353.39 (up $945.45 from the previous month). Fund totals—General, $11254.24; Observatory, $3583.15; Education, $1534.65; Explorer, $66.99; Dark Sky, $214.36; Broline, $700.00. Major revenue—membership, $933; donations, $1894.99. Major expenses—CCD color wheel, $774; Sidereal Times special edition, $572.00; applications, $179.88; bulk mail deposits, $100; GNTO expenses, $98.90; Astronomy Day posters, $60. Membership—regular 209 (up 3); family 64 (up 2); educational 17 (down 6); total paid 290 (down 1), honorary 4 (no change); complementery 11 (no change), total membership 305 (down 1).

TAAS/Lodestar Astronomy Center
David Beining discussed the Lodestar forum, planned for May 4 at the astronomy center. Ray and Dan agreed to represent TAAS at that event. Neil reviewed an April 3 meeting with David Beining and David Blair, in which the joint TAAS/Lodestar Astronomy Center photo exhibit was planned. He reported on preliminary rules, categories, and procedures. David Beining expressed the hope that the exhibit would become an annual event.

GNTO Committee
Pete reported that the GNTO Committee had met April 18 to evaluate loading dolly for the Meade 16” and that the dolly was subsequently purchased. Arrangements for Astronomy Day had also been discussed and Pete thanked Larry and Nancy Cash for a fine Powerpoint Presentation that had been prepared for Astronomy Day.

Submissions and materials were being also being collected for the Screensaver project. Pete noted that grant applications are in the works with a focus on the NGC Max and a laptop for GNTO. Pete also outlined capital expenditures of $700 to $900 for upgrades to the mount of the Isengard: refurbishing of motors and addition of a jog box. The Board gave consent for those expenditures.

La Semilla
Mark Kroska addressed the Board, recommending that TAAS keep its foot in the door concerning development of La Semilla, just south of Albuquerque. The State Land Office has made an offer to give TAAS a five-year lease on the land at no cost, with no decision necessary before November. Pete expressed concern about La Semilla’s place in the Society’s public programs. Ray wondered about the commitment of Society time involved. Board members will make their own visit to La Semilla, tentatively May 19.

 Grants
Barry requested information from Board members for PNM Foundation grants, not that several opportunities a year to apply, with a deadline of May 15 on the next one. Eric noted that General Mills is very receptive to Grant applications.

Retrospective
Ray called the weather “our best friend” for the Messier Marathon, and requested a “cheer for Judy and Sammy” for their efforts toward a successful Astronomy Day. The Board adjourned at 9:10 P.M.
Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

❖

For details on events (including a handy event map sheet), visit the Backyard Astronomy Website:
http://mywebpages.comcast.net/backyardastronomy
Ryan Gray
backyard@taas.org

❖

Sammy Lockwood
Did you “Coffee shop” with us after the May TAAS general meeting? If not, then you are missing out on what has become a popular TAAS tradition. Coffee shop Astronomy after the TAAS monthly meetings is often the perfect way to end the evening.

The tradition continues in June at the Flying Star Cafe on North Rio Grande Blvd, just north of Griegos Rd. This location combines fairly dark, quiet skies with a huge outdoor patio. The perfect venue for coffee shop astronomy, which combines good food and good company with appreciative viewers.

Even if you don’t set up a scope, it’s a nice way to get together.

Photos by Sammy Lockwood

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June 2002
Page 7

Ray Collins
Amateur Telescope Making Workshop

Please note that the second meeting in July, ordinarily Wednesday the 17th, is cancelled to allow for staff vacations. We anticipate that full operations will resume in August.

Ryan Gray
Backyard Astronomy

For details on events (including a handy event map sheet), visit the Backyard Astronomy Website:
http://mywebpages.comcast.net/backyardastronomy
Ryan Gray
backyard@taas.org

Judy Stanley
School Star Party News

Our very successful school star party season ended with, can you believe it, RAIN! The clouds did part just long enough for the crescent Moon and Venus to grace one field of view. What a show stopper! The principal of Gil Sanchez Elementary, Joanna Carter, was so thrilled with our outreach effort that she made a generous donation out of her own pocket. An amazing way to end our 2001-2002 school year.

Plans are in the works for revisions to our school outreach effort, so stand by for upcoming announcements. Our family of docents has grown this year, however we still need YOU. Do consider becoming part of our docent family.

Please plan to attend the June 1 general meeting as we present awards for outstanding achievement in astronomy outreach education to those who shared their love of astronomy with over 2,000 students this year. Great job everyone! However, the best is yet to come...

The Official Newsletter of The Albuquerque Astronomical Society
This year’s very successful Messier Marathon at GNTO on April 13th is reported elsewhere, so I will not say more about it here. Our April GNTO committee meeting took place on the 18th with eight attendees, including Dave Brown, Larry Cash, Ray Collins, Nancy Davis, Karen Keese, Mark Kroska, and Gordon Pegue. We started out by discussing some planned improvements and decided to purchase a loading dolly to make it easier to move the Meade 16” dob in and out of the observatory. We also discussed plans to use some surplus road grader blades that Larry located at the county yard to refurbish the cutting edges of our road dragger. The dragger is now usable again, and we will be taking turns dragging the lower part of Twining when time permits.

We reviewed Larry and Nancy’s progress on a slide presentation that was later used at Astronomy Day, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events. The slide show is a great product, and can also be shown at other events.

We had a very successful GNTO training session on May 4th, with excellent attendance and enthusiastic participants. Since we had over 30 folks, I will not attempt to list all the names here. Karen Keese led the Level I training, and Mark Kroska ran the Level III CCD and Astrophysics training. Later in the evening, I did the Level II training on use of the GNTO computers, and the interface between the Isengard and TheSky software on the TAAS 1 computer. When this interface is established, you can see where the Isengard is pointing on the sky chart on the computer screen, and you can also use the computer to guide to any of the many objects in the software database. Our next GNTO training session is scheduled for July 13th.

By the following weekend (May 11th), Mark Kroska had our new CFW-8 color filter wheel set up to use with our ST-9E CCD camera. Around 20 folks attended this evening, and fortunately the winds did begin to subside around dusk, as they often do at GNTO. Great sky conditions rewarded those of us who came down to GNTO. An eager group was preoccupied with CDD imaging, using the new color wheel, and I understand the imaging sessions lasted right up to dawn’s early light. The color images I have seen so far look great! Thanks again to the three people whose donations covered nearly all of the cost of this new color wheel ($500 from George Pellegrino’s business, MyoRehab Inc., and donations of $100 each from Carl Frisch and Gordon Pegue).

Upcoming events at GNTO include events on Friday June 6th and Saturday June 8th. Like all GNTO Fridays, you should call to confirm that someone will be at the observatory, but the Saturday event is definite. This second weekend of June is also shared with Chaco, and GNTO will be available for those who want a closer viewing site. Remember there are several general-purpose telescopes for you to use at GNTO, so don’t feel you need to have your own equipment in order to have fun at our observatory.

GNTO committee meetings are open to all interested TAAS members. We meet on Thursdays, one week before the TAAS general meeting. If you have questions about access and availability of GNTO, please contact me (Pete Eschman, gnto@taas.org, home phone: 873-1517, work phone: 277-0020.) As a reminder, there are lots of free ranging cattle along the road to GNTO, and the young calves can be very unpredictable, so be careful as you drive! I hope to see you soon at our observatory.
New Mexico Astronomers Narrowly Escape Firestorm

Jackie Diehl
Alamogordo Astronomy Club

Mindful of the potential for forest fires in southeastern New Mexico, Mike and Lynn Rice chose the summit of Mount Joy near the small town of Mayhill for their inn and guest observatory (S&T: August 1999, page 86) because they thought it offered good protection from these devastating events.

But their worst fears were realized on May 2nd when a wind-whipped firestorm exploded from 800 to 9,500 acres in one day and raced toward their New Mexico Skies observatory compound. “It was terrifying,” says Lynn. Fortunately, an eight-member team of “hotshots” and a truck full of fire-retardant foam arrived just in time, fighting the advancing flames all night and saving all the summit’s buildings from incineration.

When the Rices returned the next day, they found that the flames had come within inches of one structure and had left a layer of ash on everything – including their seven large telescopes. Nothing was damaged, Lynn reports, “but we’ve been vacuuming like mad!”

Donations to TAAS

TAAS General Fund: Mike Pendley, Robert Williams, Andy Freman, and the American Civil Engineers Conference.

TAAS GNTO Fund: James Moore and Pete Eschman.

TAAS GNTO Fund in remembrance of Lyman Sandy: Eaves, Bardache, Baugh, Kierst & Kiernan PA, Joyce Lackey, Chuck & Louise Peterson, and Robert & Elizabeth Sandy.

CCD Color Filter Wheel for GNTO: Gordon Pegue, George Pellegrino and Carl Frisch.

TAAS Education Fund: Navaho Elementary, Onate Elementary and Tomasita Elementary.

Astrophotography Contest

TAAS and Lodestar announce a joint competition in astrophotography. The categories include Youth, Land and Sky, Film or Plate, CCD, and Master. The competition will be judged by TAAS members, professional photographers, and a Lodestar representative. The deadline for submission will be August 21, 2002, and the entries will be on display at the Lodestar Planetarium from September 21 through November 21, 2002. Awards and certificates will be presented. Further details and contest rules will be posted soon, so get out those cameras and star charts and start clicking.

Editor’s Note

Dan Richey

Please note that the deadline for the July 2002 issue of The Sidereal Times will be Friday, June 14th, as the finished manuscript must be at the printers on Monday, June 17th so that you will receive it by the following Saturday. My e-mail address is editor@taas.org.
Astronomy Day Highlights

Astronomy Day 2002 was held on April 20th at the Coronado Shopping Center in Albuquerque, NM. Once again, the event was organized and hosted by The Albuquerque Astronomical Society, and was a complete success.

In addition to a TAAS informational booth and solar viewing, this year’s show included a few new additions. The TAAS Starlab was used for Spectral Analysis and slide show demonstrations, Ray Collins gave live mirror grinding demonstrations, and Brock Parker unveiled his 18” trailer mounted telescope, towed by a Harley Davidson motorcycle. It was quite a show.

Many thanks to the people who spent time and effort to make Astronomy Day a success. If I list them all here I would risk missing someone (as I have in past years), so I will refrain. Big thanks to Pete, Mae Jeanne, and the crew at Coronado Center.

In addition to a TAAS informational booth and solar viewing, this year’s show included a few new additions.

Invitations were made to almost every astronomical institution in NM earlier in the year. Many thanks to the great groups that joined us, including: The Lodestar Astronomy Center, the Air Force Research Laboratory (Starfire Optical Range), the Institute of Meteoritics, Explora Science Center, National Radio Astronomy Observatory (VLA), the Young Astronauts Club, the New Mexico Space Society, the Apache Point Observatory, the National Atomic Museum, and the Santa Fe Community College Planetarium.

For more photos of this year’s event, check out our web site at www.taas.org.

Photos by Nancy Davis

Mickey Beck

Ray Collins

Brock Parker

Bruce Levin

Dale Murray

Brock Parker

Mickey Beck

Dale Murray
Another Breakthrough for TAAS!

Barry Gordon

On Friday evening, May 3 last, about a dozen or so TAAS members gathered at UNM Observatory to set up telescopes for a public viewing of the five planet get-together in the evening’s western sky. The event was quite well attended, and the sky (for the most part) was pretty cooperative — early on, it was quite clear except for a few wisps of cloud just above the western horizon.

For an observer with some experience, the five naked-eye planets were easy to observe. For the inexperienced, however, a bit of assistance was very much in order — early on, it was quite clear except for a few wisps of cloud just above the western horizon.

Since my telescope was set up fairly close to Pete’s, I was able to overhear his guidance to one guest after another: “From Venus, the very bright one, you go down and to the right toward that small wisp of cloud — then just above that cloud, you should be able to spot Mercury.”

As we all know, astronomers all over the world have for many years been practicing the technique known as star-hopping. However...

Of them all — to the best of my knowledge — we in TAAS are the only ones that do cloud-hopping.

Observer’s Page

Five Planets

Karen Keese

Despite great media coverage and great docent turnout, our Five Planets event at the UNM Campus Observatory on April 26 had a smaller public turnout than anticipated due to poor weather conditions.

One week earlier, John Fleck, science editor with the Albuquerque Journal, visited the Observatory for the first time, with staff photographer Jessica McGowan (also a first-timer) in tow. The result was a wonderful article with outstanding color photos that ran the following week on the front page of the Metro section, making instant celebrities of David Blair, Barry Spletzer, and Sammy Lockwood. In addition, Larry Moehlenbrink with KKOB-AM ran excerpts all week long from a taped interview he did with me.

Because of the coverage, members of the public started arriving shortly after 6 PM on the appointed evening. All told, I believe we had approximately 100 eager planet-hunters show up, despite the fierce winds and the cloudy skies. Our Five Planets handout, special edition full-color Sidereal Times, and membership application were all popular take-aways. The valiant docents nabbed planets where they could in fleeting sucker holes and treated the enthusiastic crowd of adults and kids to the best views possible. The crowd included Dr. Stephen Gregory, our UNM liaison, who may be one of our biggest fans. As he said in an email I received the following week: “It was fun Friday—except for the wind. You TAAS people are so wonderful.”

Many thanks to the following wonderful people who, wielding scopes and binoculars, braved the sirocco and smiled through the grit in their teeth: Barry Gordon, Barry Spletzer, Brock Parker, Carl Frisch, David Blair, Jay Harden, Larry Cash, Mark Kroska, Mickey & Judy, Pete Eschman, Ray Collins, Sammy Lockwood, Steve Snider, and anyone else I may have inadvertently forgotten.

Although I spent half of the “official” planetary event ducking into my car to wash off my contact lenses, it did not dampen my ardor for this alignment. How fortunate we are to be living at a time when we can experience the simple thrill of facing west and ticking off five planets. I am lucky to have a clear view from my front yard and I’ve been looking every chance I get. It’s an added thrill to watch them over a series of evenings come together and move apart in a sort of celestial dance as they continue along their respective orbits. I believe our Barry Gordon calls this “the clockwork of the universe”. Don’t miss it.
programs, which include star parties held every Friday and Saturday throughout the summer.

Part of the Park’s mission is to celebrate the dark sky at the Canyon and to be a force in protecting that sky; in fact they have designated their sky a natural resource. Angie Richman gave us an overview of the light pollution measurement project that is currently underway at the Park; this is a joint effort of the Park Service, TAAS, and UNM. The goal of the project is to measure the current sky brightness at the site, afflicted even at their remote location by 13 light domes from urban centers as far away as Albuquerque, and to monitor changes to the baseline measurements both seasonally and over time. The measurements are achieved by Carl Frisch using the Park’s CCD camera to take three 360-degree sets of images—around the horizon, at 45 degrees above the horizon, and at the zenith. The collected data is then sent to Dr. Stephen Gregor at UNM for reduction; Angie is mainly involved with this data reduction process and with public education. The results of the light pollution research will be presented at TAAS’s Dark Sky Conference and Backyard Astronomy Expo, which is scheduled for Saturday, September 28.

John Sefick capped off the program with an eyeful of great astro-images taken at Chaco with various refractors and his ST-10E CCD camera. John first displayed the camera and explained how it worked. Then he led us on a breathtaking tour of the universe that featured colorful nebula such as the Rosette, the Horsehead, the Flame, the Bubble, the Dumbbell, and the Ring; and massive galaxies such as the Sombrero, the Black Eye, the Whirlpool, the Hamburger, the Siamese Twins, and the Andromeda which is apparently on a collision course with the Milky Way. A note on the colors seen in astro-images: red signifies a preponderance of hydrogen; green is oxygen, and blue is nitrogen. John also treated us to great images of the Moon, Comet Ikeya Zhang, and Jupiter which it seems is the junkpile of the solar system, holding in its gravitational field a lot of debris that, unconstrained, might have blasted Earth to smithereens in its infancy.

Many thanks to our three speakers for making the long journey to give us such a memorable evening. If you want another Chaco “fix”, be sure to check out the details of our upcoming star party in the next article.

Neil Goldberg posed a positively Blairesque trivia question to the gathering: Canopus, lying in Carina at declination minus 50 degrees, is the second brightest star in the sky. At which geographic point would you have to stand for Canopus to lie directly overhead in the night sky? A younger member of our audience, Stephanie Moats, took home the prize, with the correct answer of Rio Gallegos, Patagonia, Argentina.

The die-hards adjourned to the new Flying Star on Rio Grande Blvd NW for some coffee shop astronomy, good food, and good company – please join us next time!

Earthbound photos by Eric Bucher
Astrophotos by John Sefick

Going to Chaco
Karen Keese

It is fast approaching—the first Chaco star party of the year! ROAD TRIP!!! The event is scheduled for Saturday, June 8. I believe most people drive up Saturday morning and drive back Sunday evening, but the length of your stay is up to you. It is a 3-hour smooth, scenic drive from Albuquerque on the newly renovated Highway 550.

Our host, G.B. Cornucopia, is planning a catered meal of traditional Navajo cuisine for our group on Saturday at about 5 PM. He is also planning some give-away contests for the visiting public that evening, e.g., answer the astronomical question correctly and receive an astronomy book.

G.B. also hopes to offer a special walking tour or two on Sunday morning for both astronomers and interested public. These will feature some of the archeoastronomical sites that are easily visited, and those of you who have been there know that G.B. gives a wonderful tour with rich insights into the Chacoan way of life.

For accommodations, G.B. has reserved the special volunteer campground for our group for the night of the 8th. This campground sports a refrigerator, a cooking stove, a large sink, and even showers (how civilized!). For those who wish to stay additional nights, the public campground has 47 sites available on a first-home, first-served basis. Tables, fireplaces and central toilets are provided. No firewood, food, or gas is available in the Park. Trailers over 30 feet are not permitted.

If you need more information or have questions, contact G.B. at his home number, 1-505-786-7145. Please be persistent when calling as G.B.’s machine doesn’t always pick up. Just keep trying until you get the machine. (Hey, it’s Chaco, it’s supposed to be primitive!) Or you can email him at G_B_Cornucopia@nps.gov (OK, it’s not that primitive.)

I made my first trip to Chaco earlier this year, and I’m still trying to put my finger on what it is that makes the place “magical”. Perhaps it is a synthesis of things both physical and emotional. All I can say for sure is you can’t experience it unless you go there. The sky alone is worth the trip—black as the ace of spades and incredibly transparent. Here’s a newsflash for you: a analysis of the data collected for the dark-sky survey has revealed that the sky overhead at Chaco is comparable to the sky at the Mauna Kea Observatory. You heard it here.
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Mara Payne brought her students from an Astronomy class she was teaching at UNM’s Valencia campus. She used the Meade 16" GNTO loaner scope to great advantage with the students, who also enjoyed a tour of the GNTO facility. Robert Williams started out using the 6" GNTO loaner dobsonian, and then switched to the Meade 16" when it became available later in the evening. As you can tell, not everyone stayed to see the morning at GNTO, but everyone had a great time no matter how long they stayed. Some of us who did stay till morning met at the diner for breakfast before heading back to town. I’m sure the good food and coffee helped us make it home in one piece.

Here are object counts from some of the folks that reported their tallies. In the group of folks that used NGC MAX or computer goto mount plus charts we have: Mark Kroska (20), Mark Nagrodsky (40), Elaine Kroska (97), Larry Cash (105), Pete Eschman (107+2 comets), and Gordon Pegue (107+4 comets and some faint fuzzies). In the group of observers who used only charts and finder scopes or telrads we have: Robert Williams (30), David Blair (71), Sammy Lockwood (89+2 comets), Karen Keese (90), and John Laning (107).

Mark Kroska had the Astrophysics and ST-9E CCD camera set up and he helped several folks image objects throughout the night. Ray Collins and others also used the Isengard to share various objects, which made the viewing all that much more fun. I would like to thank all the people who helped to make this event such a success, and I’d like to thank all of you that came down to enjoy the event with us. Let’s do it again next year!

Messier Marathon continued

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