

Inside this Issue:

- 1 Bustin' Dew with the Dew Buster!
- 2 Review of Xephem!
- 3 My Back Pages!

Skywatch
1207 Selma Street
Mobile, AL 36604
U.S.A.

Rod Mollise's

Skywatch



Bustin' Dew with the Dew Buster!

A “premium” dew heater controller...

Rod Mollise

What do you do about dew? Do you worry about dew?

You do if you live in a location where high humidity makes nature's little, damp gift a prime enemy of the working observer. Since I live on the Gulf of Mexico coast, dew is an omnipresent fact of my observing life. Many a promising Summer observing session has been ruined over the years by fogged, dripping, dew-SLIMEY optics! But with the release of the Dew Buster Controller I've gone nuclear in my war against midnight optics baths!

What's a Dew Buster? How does it bust dew?

Let's not get ahead of the story. Let me turn back the clock to those stone-age days of amateur astronomy, the early

70s. There was this new scope being advertised in Sky and Telescope. One that had hit amateur astronomy like a thunderbolt, the Schmidt Cassegrain in the form of the original Orange Tube C8. The new, mass-produced Celestron was the telescope that a lot of us had been waiting for. It combined elegant, useful features into a package that virtually made it a portable observatory. Oh! how happy I was when I got my new Celestron out into the field for the first time on a clear July evening.

I was happy for a while, anyway.

After a few hours I noticed that stars weren't as sharp as they had been. And the brighter ones were developing foggy little haloes. Was something wrong with my new baby? Yep. A look at the corrector showed it to be a dripping mess. Thus ended my first observing run with the Orange Tube. It was a nice demonstration of what happens when you point a big lens at the heat-sucking sky in a humid environment: dew “falls” (or “forms,” really). Since it appeared that I was back in the Southeastern United States to stay, I knew I had to do something to make my Summer (and Fall, Spring and sometimes Winter) evenings less miserable dew-wise. But *what?*



First Blood.

Step one was one of those thingies like I saw on the ends of my buddies' Unitron refractors: dewshields. A dew shield is a simple thing that works on a simple principle. It's nothing more than an extension of the tube in front of the corrector (or objective). It works by shielding the lens from the normal, full 180 degree view of warmth-sucking space that it would otherwise be looking at. For people in some parts of the country, a dewshield is all that's needed. For areas with low humidity and light dew, you can probably get away with just a shield. Even if you live in a dew-heavy area, a dewshield is a good investment since it serves as a light shield and tends to keep inquisitive fingers off your corrector plate.

Things heat up.

For observing locations where dew is heavy and dewshields alone eventually fail to keep optics dry (usually just at the moment when you're *finally* about to track down the Horsehead in your C8), there's just one way to prevent dew: keep the corrector (or objective, or eyepiece, or whatever) warmer than the ambient temperature. It doesn't have to be much warmer—just warmer. Various devices came along to do just that. First were the blow dryers. I mean it! Just a blow dryer you swiped from Sis or girlfriend (or your own, maybe--these were the 70s, the days of Big Hair for everybody). This really worked. So long as you did it right. You couldn't pump 1500 watts onto the scope—do that and you'd find that it took quite some time for your optics to reacclimatize. You had to use gentle heat, and you had to have a source of AC or a big battery/inverter combo. A better choice for astronomy was the little 12volt blow dryers, which were sold as window defrosters in truck stops or, quickly, as "dew zappers" by enterprising scope merchants. But

this was not the ideal solution, either. Sure, a zapper would get rid of the dew, but in damp conditions it becomes real old, real soon to have to keep zapping the corrector every couple of minutes.

Perfect?

We amateurs are not known to let a problem go unsolved forever when it comes to our beloved equipment—maybe a decade or two, but no more! Late astronomy entrepreneur Roger Tuthill turned things up a notch by introducing his "No-Dew Heated Dew-Caps." These things worked, more or less, but were a little clunky. And expensive--at about a hundred bucks a pop (C8 size) in big 1980s dollars. But a better idea was already coming off amateur kitchen tables. Eventually, somebody cracked the code as regards dew. Make yourself a heating element to go around the corrector plate. Make it from a string of resistors Work things out so that just a *leetle* heat is applied, just enough to keep the corrector dry. Glue 'em around the end of the tube. Or maybe tape 'em in place.

No doubt there were a couple of these "dew heaters" made commercially before **Jim Kendrick** came along, but he was the man who really brought the idea to fruition. Canadian artist Kendrick was a new scope owner who couldn't believe that these silly, SILLY amateur astronomers hadn't come up with a better way to keep dew off a C8.

If nobody else would, Jim would. By the early 90s he was selling the "Kendrick Dew Remover System." And what a system it was! He produced heating elements that looked good and worked well, with the active elements being built into nice cloth strips that were fastened around your corrector/objective or other optics with Velcro. From the beginning, he made heaters for everything from a .965" eyepiece to a C14. And, most importantly, you

didn't just plug these into a 12volt battery as you had the kitchen table masterpieces or the earliest commercial dew heaters, you plugged them into a **controller**. This allowed you to vary the power to the heaters, keeping your optics dry and your battery alive for a whole observing run! And man did the Kendrick System work! I still remember my first use of the Kendricks on my C8. At a horribly dewy star party, I, the only person with this new-fangled "System," had the only undewed scope left on the field by midnight.

Nothin' is perfect.

So the Kendrick System is all you need? Can't be improved upon? That's what I thought 'til last Fall. I was at our local star party, the Deep South Regional Star Gaze, one humid PM when Louisiana amateur Ron Keating trotted over holding what I at first thought was a Kendrick controller. Nope, said Ron, this was a Dew Buster. A "replacement" or "alternative" controller for use with the Kendrick heating elements. Ron told me he really *had something*, he thought, and with the help of some associates, was planning on putting the controller (and maybe some of his own heating strips) into production. "Why?" said Skeptical Old Rod. "You can't improve on the Kendrick System, can you?" Ron said the thought he *could*, and had, and proceeded to tell me the how and why.

Goliath Kendrick has a weak spot?

When people first see the knob on the Kendrick controller, they just naturally assume it varies the temperature of the heating elements. It must be a *thermostat*, right? Wrong. As is clearly stated in the Kendrick literature, the system doesn't know anything about the temperature. The farther you advance the control, the longer power is applied to the heating

elements. On "low," they get power 40% of the time. Crank it up to "full" and current flows constantly. This works OK, but it is not the perfect situation. Most people, seeing dew beginning to form on the tube of the scope, have a tendency to crank up the Kendrick all the way until the heater elements feel warm to the touch. This is bad for several reasons. First, the heaters don't have to be hot to work, they just have to keep the lens above ambient. Turning them up may introduce seeing-destroying air currents or may even cause the corrector to deform slightly. And you will suck down the battery in a hurry.

Out Kendricking the Kendrick.

The Dew Buster out-does the Kendrick by doing what you first assumed the Kendrick would; the dew buster senses the temperature and maintains it at a constant figure. It's just like the thermostat on your central heater at home. Once you've got an idea of how damp the evening will be, you set the controller to the required temperature above ambient air temperature (the dial's scale indicates degrees above ambient--see **figure 1**) and forget it. The Buster will maintain that temperature all night long. And your scope will remain dew free. And you'll use no more power from your poor battery than need be. And you won't get the corrector (or objective if you're a refractor type) too hot. And, best of all, once you've got the Buster set **you won't have to WORRY about it or the dew any more!**

How well did it work at Pine Lake?

I had a chance to use Ron's prototype the last evening of the star party, and was impressed. It kept my optics dry at any rate. But I was more focused on observing than on a dew controller, and was tired from

several late-nighters. I did mention to Ron that if he'd send me a production model once he got going, I'd let the folks know what I thought of it. He replied in the affirmative and that was that and there matters stood for a couple of months. One March afternoon, however, a little



package appeared at my front door. "Ahhhh...astrogoodies from somebody," I said in my best Homer-Simpson-meets-the-donuts voice. Ripping the box open revealed a full-up Dew Buster.

It's not an overstatement to say I was quite impressed. I've seen a lot of garage-type astro products over the years, some of them really good, but almost all having that "homebrew" look. Not the Dew Buster. It looked every bit as "professional" as the Kendrick to me. Since it had been some months since I'd seen the prototype, though, I was surprised that, when you got beyond the good looks it shares with the K, how different this controller is.

For Starters, in place of the Kendrick's 4 output plugs, this sucker has 8. And that's a good thing if you have heaters for everything and lots of piggyback stuff riding on your OTA like I do. Sure, you can use splitters for the Kendrick outputs, but that's a clumsy solution. I further noted that 6 of the elements were labeled "AUX," while 2 were labeled "AUTO." What was up with *that*?

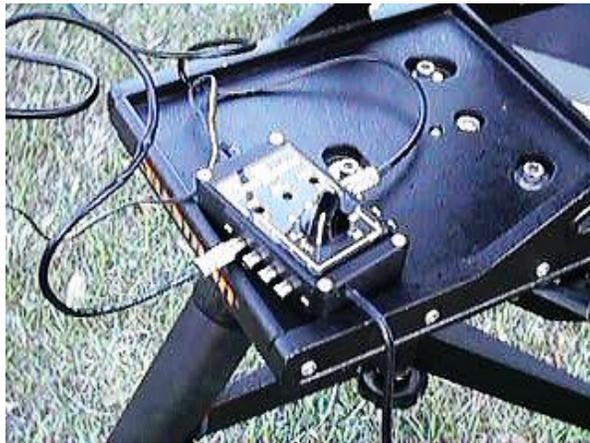
A glance at the (simple, but clear) instruction manual reveals that the 6 AUX jacks are not temperature controlled. These are intended for your "accessory" heaters: eyepieces, finder objectives, Telrads, whatever. The heaters used for these items are relatively small and of low wattage. They don't draw a lot of battery power, so merely cycling them off and on like the Kendrick controller does its heaters does not adversely affect battery life. Also, getting a finder objective or eyepiece a little hotter than necessary is really not a huge problem. These outputs supply current to the heaters 40% if the time, just like the Kendrick Controller at its lowest setting.

But they have an added, very nice feature. When the Dew Buster is first turned on, it supplies "boost power" to the AUX jacks. This initial 100% power application means that the accessory heaters warm up quickly. If they started out at 40% it would take a heck of a long time to get them warm enough, making the formation of dew a possibility.

But the **stars of the show** are the 2 AUTO jacks. These AUTO receptacles work in conjunction with a temperature probe that plugs into a mini-jack on the top right surface of the Buster. The probe incorporates 2 sensors; one is placed under your corrector heater strip (see **figure 2**). The other senses ambient air temperature. When everything is set up and working, the AUTO output keeps your corrector at a selectable temperature of from 0 to 25 degrees above ambient (depending on the setting of the temperature controller knob) by pulsing power to the heater at from 0 to 100% of the time as NEEDED.

What else is different about the Dew Buster? In place of the Kendrick's single red power light, this baby has *three* LEDs, two reds and a yellow.

The left-most indicator, "AUX" indicates power is applied to the AUX heaters, as you'd guess. The right-most LED blinks as current flows to the temperature-controlled AUTO jacks as required. The yellow LED is the system's low-battery indicator, and is just the outward indicator for a rather sophisticated low-power management system. At 11.5 volts, the yellow LED glows dimly, indicating your battery has just about had it. When voltage drops to about 11.2V, the LED glows brightly and power to the heaters is immediately shut down. Since many lead acid batteries will be ruined if you drain them too far, this feature may save you from buying another lawn-tractor battery, something that's happened to me more than once.



The Dew Buster comes with a nice, long (about 10') power cord terminated in a heavy duty cigarette-lighter-type male plug. Ron says that the plug is rated for 10 amps, more than most C14s covered with heaters will need, but that the Buster itself is rated for a whopping 20 amps internally, and can be special-ordered with an even heavier-duty power cord.

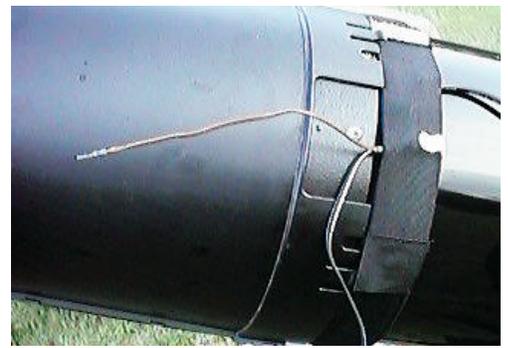
But how would this fancy-shmancy thing work in the real world? I set out to find out. The first opportunity I had to try the Buster was at the March Members-Only-Star-Party that I run for my club, the Mobile Astronomical Society, at our Pine Lake facility. Yep, I said "lake."

Combine an unseasonably warm March night, a body of water only 100 meters away, and very high humidity, and I figured the Buster would be put to the ultimate test.

The first order of business was getting the system set-up on my Celestron Ultima C8. I was a little leery of routing yet another wire on the scope—the temperature probe—but this device is connected to the controller with comparatively light-gauge cable, and didn't make my scope look any more like an octopus than it already does. All the heating elements went on as normal, with everything but the corrector heater plugging into the AUX jacks. Since the night was sure to be WET, I'd brought out the complete arsenal, with heaters for finder objective, finder eyepiece, Telrad and main eyepiece. Installing the C8's corrector heater was slightly different on this night, since I knew the temperature sensor would be involved. A glance at the instructions showed that the "telescope sensor" was to be placed underneath the corrector heater strip and held in place with a small clip.

The dew shield would then be placed over the heater and sensor. The ambient air sensor, which extends out from the telescope sensor, would extend forward of the scope sensor and must not touch the scope. Since I use a hard-plastic dew shield, I had to modify these instructions slightly, but everything worked just as advertised (**figure 3**).

And that's the bottom line. How did everything work? **Incredibly well.** My scope optics were free of dew all evening long. I started out at 10 degrees above ambient, didn't touch the control all night long, and basically just forgot about the nice



Buster. I'd occasionally glance at the controller just to be reassured by the friendly pulsing "AUTO" LED that everything was well. I was running the system off a small 7 amp-hour battery pack that I like to use with the C8, since it's nice and light. A couple of times I've come close to draining it with the Kendrick after a full night of observing. Not with the Dew Buster. At the end of the evening, my wimpy little battery pack still had plenty of get-up-and-go!

Should you get a Dew Buster?

That depends. If you live where the dew ain't bad, you can probably get by with the Kendrick controller at 75 dollars (plus the cost for heaters, naturally). It's a *fine*, well-made piece of equipment. Mine's been providing *excellent* service for 7 years now. And the Dew Buster controller does cost more, at about \$150.00. The Buster is not a "replacement" for the excellent Kendrick; it's the next step up, a premium alternative.

But the Dew Buster works better.

It's not just the cool lights, or the temperature sensors, or the extra jacks. All that is just icing. *It does a better job of keeping your optics dry under demanding conditions.* And if you, like me, live in a virtual swamp, you owe it to yourself to stop losing observing time because of dewed optics, stop losing hair trying to get your dew heaters running right, and losing money buying yet *another* K-mart tractor battery. At less than the cost of a mid-grade eyepiece, how can you go wrong with the Dew Buster? Well, you can't. Go get one, boys and girls.

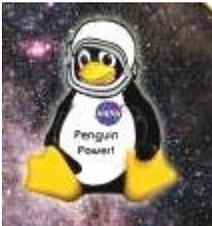
How *do* you get one? Just go here and all your questions will be answered:

<http://www.gbronline.com/ronkeating/dewbuster.html>

Note: The skies have not been good this Spring, so I've only had a chance to try the Buster with my C8. I now have a NexStar 11 (C11) here, and will annotate this review with a report on its use with a larger aperture scope just as soon as possible.

JUST What the heck is an "XEphem?!"

Rod Mollise



XEphem 3.5.2
Elwood Downey
Clear Sky Institute

"Hey! What's this **XEphem** (eks-i-'fem) that I keep hearing you astro-geeks going-on about?"

According to its developer, Elwood Downey, it's "The Serious Astronomical Software Ephemeris." And I know that sounds pretty, well, *serious*. What can we glean from the Xephem website at <http://www.clearskyinstitute.com/xephem/xephem.html>? That the rather *odd* name for this program is a combination of **X**-Windows (as in Unix) and **ephemeris** (as in astronomical ephemeris, natch).

Confused yet? It's "The only scientific-grade interactive astronomical ephemeris software package that is available on all leading platforms: Microsoft Windows, Apple Macintosh and UNIX-like systems including Linux and FreeBSD!"

"Come on now! WHAT IS XEPHEM?!"

OK, OK, keep your shirt on. It's simple, XEphem is a small revolution in astronomy software. It's an ephemeris generator, sure, but it's also a superb planetarium program. And it has advanced features and an incredibly "open" structure that let you add catalogs and images to make it into one of the strongest "deep sky" programs I've ever seen, more than powerful enough to take on the most advanced observing programs and to leave some very advanced (and pricey) astronomy software in the *dust*. A very truncated list of XEphem's list of features includes:

- Computes heliocentric, geocentric and topocentric information for all objects;
- Has built-in support for all planets; the moons of Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Earth; central meridian longitude of Mars and Jupiter; Saturn's rings; and Jupiter's Great Red Spot.
- Allows user-defined objects including stars, deepsky objects, asteroids, comets and Earth satellites.
- Offers many large databases including Tycho, Hipparcos, GSC, USNO.
- Graphically displays a 24 hour period showing when any selected objects are up;
- Displays 3-D stereo views of the Solar System that are particularly well suited for visualizing comet trajectories;

- Sorts and prints all catalogs with very flexible criteria for creating custom observing lists;
- Downloads current asteroid and comets lists from Lowell and MPC;
- Downloads timely Earth satellite orbital TLE parameters;
- Downloads Digitized Sky Survey FITS files from STScI or ESO;
- Displays seti@home client progress and plots position being processed on Sky View map.

Oh...and it's **FREE**.

"FREE? Yeah, *right*. What's the catch? There's *always* a catch."

Well, there *is* one *small* catch...to run XEphem in an optimum fashion on a PC, you really need to run it under the **Linux operating system**. The Windows "version" is not free (or even close to it), as it's really the Unix/Linux version with included software tools (which are what you're paying for) to make the thing run under Windows.

"Linux?! ARRGH! The ultimate geek pastime! *Lemme out of here!*"

Now, hold on just a minute, Bunky! Yes, in the past Linux has been, along with its brother/cousin Unix, the max in *geekware*: hard to install, hard to learn, hard to fix when things go wrong. Luckily, though, things have changed. Modern distributions ("distros") of Linux, and particularly the **Red Hat** distro are just as easy to install as Microsoft Windows (well, **almost**). With a little help from a computer savvy buddy, you can even partition off a couple of gigs of hard drive space on your Win Box, install Linux in that partition, and happily run XEphem and a wealth of other Linux/Unix astro software

(there's a lot out there; especially image processing stuff) while not giving up your beloved Windows. And you might even *learn* something about computers in the process!

While Linux is free, I advise *buying* a book/CD package of your favored distribution (some popular distro "brand-names" other than Red Hat are **Debian** and **Mandrake**). These sets are available in the computing sections of local bookstores and ensure that you have help during the install via the book (most Linux books are far more

task you may find difficult and scary at first. Instead, look around the web—there are quite a few sources for the XEphem RPM (a ready to install version of the program—you basically click in your X-Windows desktop and go). Just use Google to search for XEphem RPM.

set to your liking, you can save them from here, too. You can do some practical work here as well, including generating ephemeris tables (this program is called **xEPHEM**, after all).

"OK, <yawn> that's great. Think I'll just be running along now."

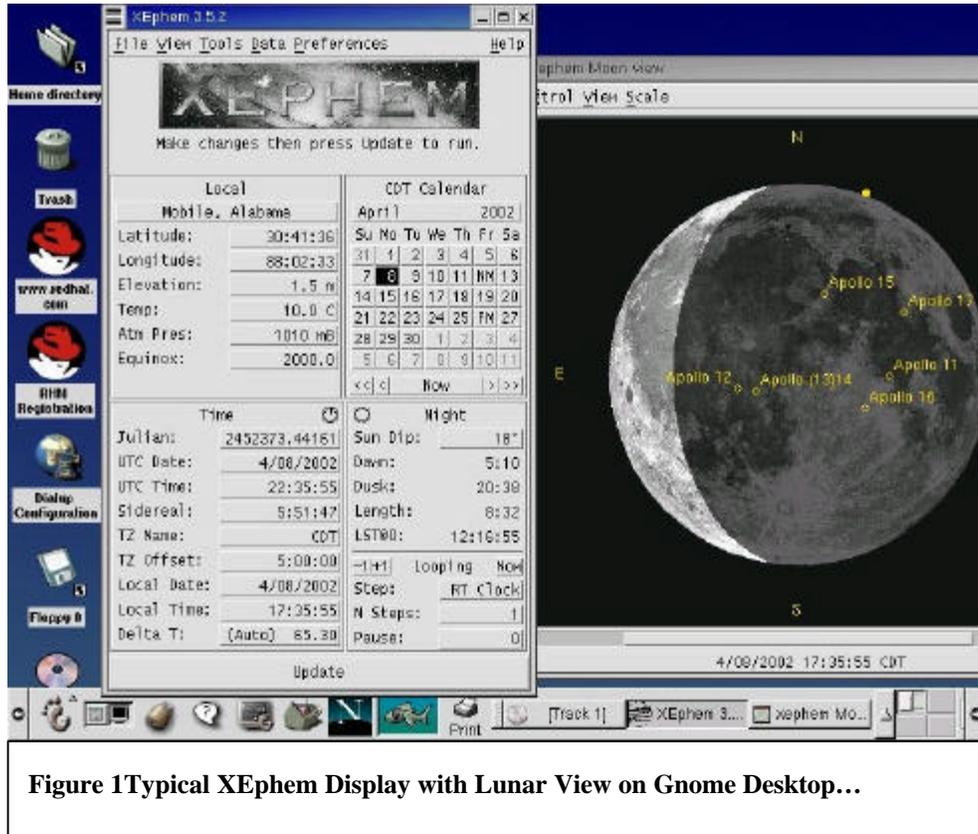


Figure 1 Typical XEphem Display with Lunar View on Gnome Desktop...

Hold on just a darned minute! You want pretty pictures? Here they come. Click on the view menu and choose the Moon. Up comes the beautiful rendering of the Earth's sister shown in **Figure 1**. You can do the same with other planets. Mars is particularly impressive from a graphics standpoint, while the Jupiter and Saturn

choices depict the great planets' retinues of moons (and

understandable than the readme files on the CDs!). You'll also have a good reference source once you've got the Penguin (Tux the penguin is the Linux mascot) up and going!

As for XEphem itself, it's available either as a relatively inexpensive CD or as a free download off the website. The CD is nice, since it has many astro-catalogs included, but is not required. The catalogs can be downloaded from many sources on the net once you've got the basic configuration of the program up and running. Actually, I don't recommend the free download from the website either—not if you're a Linux/Unix newbie. It's a source (code) file that must be compiled, a

"I've got Linux up and going, and XEphem is *working*. But I'm not sure I *like* it. It's weird."

I wouldn't call XEphem *weird*, really, but it is *different*. Practically every astronomy-planetarium program we've seen come down the pike since the DOS days and Skyglobe 3.6 shows a pretty, pretty star field when the program opens. **Not XEphem**. Instead, you're greeted by a "main menu" display. This is the central control center for the program, and is the place where you'll do things like set date, time, location, load data files and access the program's graphical displays. Once you've got these parameters

Jupiter shows off its Great Red Spot in the right location).

But the real reason most people obtain an astronomy program is for a depiction of the sky. To get that, just click "sky view" under the "view" menu. Up comes a depiction, a *lovely* depiction of the entire "skyglobe" (**Figure 3**). What you with this skyglobe is up to you. With the proper catalogs downloaded and installed (this is easy to do, and like most things in this program, is handled from the main menu), you can easily obtain a very detailed view as in **Figure 2**. This shows the great Virgo galaxy M87 and its little attendants. To create this I loaded up the Tycho 2 star catalog and the

CGCG galaxy catalog that I'd downloaded off the net. Copies of these resources converted to XEphem format were easy to find on the web, but making other downloadable catalogs into XEphem files is relatively easy. As you can see, the final result is very competitive with some very well-regarded commercial Windows programs. *Better* than quite a few that I've wasted my hard-earned bucks on, I'd say!

But you don't have to *stop* with a screen like Figure 2. Need more stars? XEphem will read the Hubble Guide Star Catalog CDs sold by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. Can't afford—or don't want to afford—these? No problem. As long as you can get your Linux computer on the Internet (Red Hat comes with a copy of Netscape Navigator for the included Gnome X-Windows desktop) you can download all the stars you need for free. XEphem will go and get GSC stars as needed, a process that's pretty seamless if you have an always-on broadband Internet connection.

You can, naturally, manipulate your onscreen view as you wish by zooming and moving around the sky, just as you can with any Windows planetarium. This is another place, admittedly, where XEphem goes its own way. Most of your movement will be done with scroll bars. The left slider controls zoom, and the right one Right Ascension or altitude (depending on if you've selected RA/DEC or

ALT/AZ on the toolbar at the top of the screen). The bottom scroll controls the remaining axis—declination or azimuth as required. Or you can right-click on objects or locations on the screen and choose "center" from the resulting menu of choices to move around. But the sliders work so well that I seldom resort to this. On a modern PC with a modern video card, Linux and XEphem run so smoothly, that the changing display as you scroll around is a joy to watch: fast, smooth, and precise.

The alt/az/RA/dec sliders are nice. But I did not really like the zoom slider, I must admit. I'm so used to the method other astro programs use, drawing a box with the mouse and clicking to zoom, that the slider seemed awkward and different. But XEphem provides an alternative ("alternative" is a word you use a lot in association with XEphem--almost as much as "free"). You can click a button on the right toolbar to enable box-dragging. Once you've drawn a box enclosing the area of the sky you're interested in, you click the "+" zoom button on the right-hand toolbar to zoom. Not quite the same as dragging and clicking in the box as we're used to with other planetariums, but still warmly

familiar.

XEphem is that fabled Horse of a Different Color in quite a few ways, but Mr. Downey was wise enough to stay close enough to the format we're used to to make the program very easy to learn. Most of the program's other most-used functions work just as you'd expect 'em to. In fact, you may even forget you're using Linux and XEphem once you start concentrating on printing star charts for your next deep sky expedition (XEphem offers excellent printing support). I was taken aback for a moment when I looked at the bottom of the screen, at the taskbar, and didn't see the familiar Windows Start button! Instead there was the Gnome desktop's little footprint (don't ask). **"Oh, yeah, this is XEphem!"**

Is there anything I don't like about XEphem 3.5.2? A few things. There is that zoom process. I much prefer the "standard" draw-box-and-click-in-box to zoom rather than XEphem's draw-box-move-mouse-to-right-side-of-screen-find-button-click-button to zoom. On the other hand, XEphem's "unzoom" button is very easy to access and use, unlike some Win programs, which require you to open a *menu* to unzoom. I

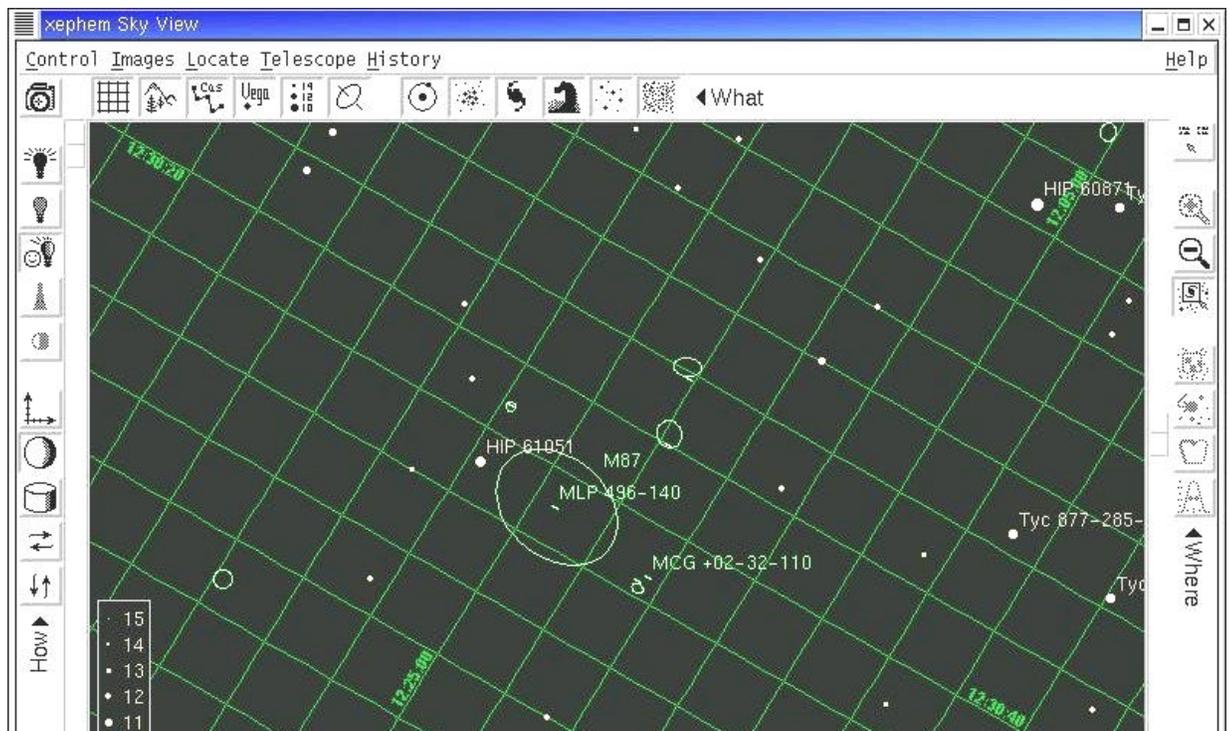


Figure 2 Zoomed in with the Tycho and CGCG catalogs turned on...

also occasionally ran into problems when zooming in to small areas. Sometimes the field stars I should have been seeing at increased "magnifications" weren't drawn very quickly, with 5 or 10 seconds elapsing before a redraw. Sometimes, they didn't get drawn at all. This was very occasional, though, and I could always fix this by opening the Field Stars Dialog and hitting "apply". I generally liked the idea of having a separate main menu apart from the Sky View window. This keeps the menus on the sky window uncluttered. But there were a few instances when I wished that some menu choices were in both places or just on the sky menu. But these times were rare. Once you get used to it, XEphem is very ergonomically sound.

How do I rate XEphem against that other well-known freeware astronomy giant, Cartes du Ciel? Well, there's no doubt in my mind that Cartes is a more mature program. But XEphem is close, and in some ways maybe even superior, if not quite as fancy looking or feature-laden. XEphem is certainly in the lead when it comes to non-Windows computing. By the way, the new Apple Macintoshes run an operating system (OSX) that is Unix related/based, and there's already a Mac version of XEphem for these machines. Each program has its strengths, and I rate both of these programs as "up there" with just about any commercial astronomy offerings.

XEphem, like CdC, possesses some fanatically loyal users, and, also like CdC, the author has set-up a Yahoo mailing list for the program's fans. Elwood Downey is OFTEN found there "in person", answering questions from users, taking suggestions, and moderating an enthusiastic group of Linux-loving Astro-software hounds!

I **love** XEphem, and if you can make peace with the Penguin (Linux), you will too! If I can help you get XEphem up and running, please don't hesitate to ask for help!

If old Rod (who's still locked in the TRS-80 Model1 computer days) can get this fine, DEEP program up and running, so can you!

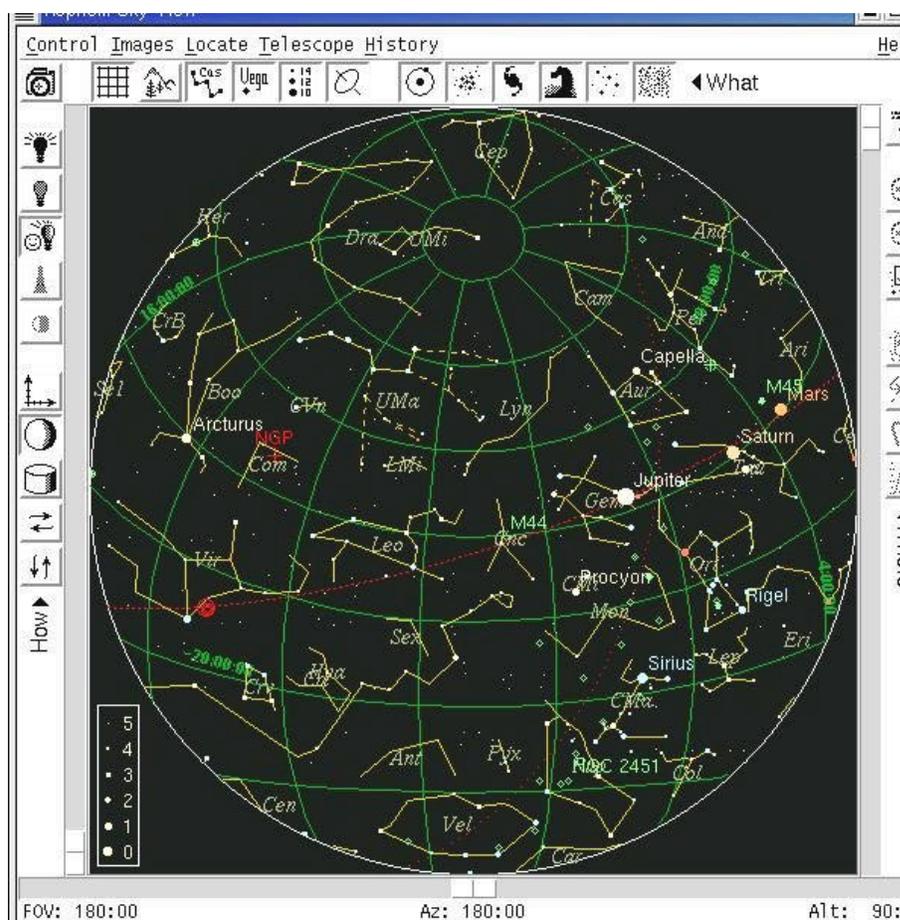


Figure 3 The Initial Skyview...

My Back Pages



Club Notes

Mobile Astronomical Society (MAS)

The May meeting was particularly enjoyable and productive with a report on the recent Fairhope Elementary Star Gaze. George Byron, Pat Rochford and Judy Anderson brought their scopes out and entertained and amazed scores of little ones with views of the “planetary alignment!” Quite a bit of discussion on upcoming star parties, too, with Judy departing for the Texas Star Party and Rod and Pat heading for Chiefland.

SCT-USER

The GRAND SECOND ANNUAL SCT USER Imaging Competition is now underway! We’re hoping this year’s edition will be every bit as successful as the legendary 2001 contest. This year there’s the added attraction of prizes donated by quite a few generous astro vendors!

In How far would you go to escape Beavis and Butt-head? I thought Cocoa Beach would be far enough. However, opening the trunk of the car immediately revealed two stowaways:

Huh-huh...huh-huh, let us out buttmunch. We want chicks...uhhhh...like Spring break chicks! Huh-huh, huh, huh!”

Heh-heh, yeah, yeah...CHICKS...CHICKS!

With that, the twosome, apparently somewhat worse the wear from their long trip in somewhat enclosed confines, headed off not to the beach but towards an Atlas 5 gantry just as a launch was about to take place. Ah, well...the first idiots in space will be another laurel for NASA’s crown, I supposed. At any rate, turning back to the trunk revealed, amidst the luggage and abandoned Nachos, that vaunted Mayo Jar (hermetically sealed and kept on Funk and Wagnal’s back porch for a fortnight) the latest, and I do mean LATEST...

Rumours

*In Meade news...whatever happened to the LXD55 GEM goto scopes that had everybody so excited? They are here...sort of. Meade has finally started deliveries. But only in limited numbers, and only for some of the scopes. So far, only the 6 inch SNT and the 5 inch achro refractor have found their way to users. Verdict? Optics on both appear pretty good, the mount is somewhat heavier-duty than the CG 5, and the goto appears to work. The mount is apparently sturdy enough that Gary Hand is offering an LXD mount with a Celestron 9.25 SCT OTA mounted on it! Meade does not sell the mount separately, so you have to buy the 6 SNT or the 5 refractor **and** the Celestron OTA. We should, MEADE SAYS, start seeing SOME 8 SNT deliveries “**any day now,**” with the 10 SNT and 6 refractor to follow in early June—in dribs and drabs, I’d guess.*

How’s the GPS LX200 doin’? Fair to middlin’ at least... the scope’s introduction has not been problem free, but most of the early QC issues have been cleaned up, with the

remaining problems apparently centering on software (which Meade continues to update frequently).

How about the boys 'n grrls at Celestron? Little birds are chirping that the justly admired CG 9.25 will FINALLY get a mounting worthy of its excellence...an NS mount. In other words, that's right, get ready for a NEXSTAR 9.25 GPS SOON (whatever "soon" means in telescope-makerese)!

The Anonymous Astronomer

A NexStar 11 Comes to Live at Chaos Manor South...

