

Exploring the Final Frontier....

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Volume 9, Issue 2

"A Newsletter for the Truly Outbound!"

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Skywatch
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Skywatch

"The Moon Obscured: A Lunar Eclipse Star Party"

Rod Mollise

Some astronomical events are naturals for introducing the public to the wonders of the heavens. Everybody remembers, I'm sure, the huge outpouring of public interest in the sky a few years ago during the apparitions of those two monster comets, Hyakutake and Hale-Bopp. We haven't had anything stir the public's curiosity about astronomy for a while, so Mobile Astronomical Society members were enthusiastic about holding a public star party at the Mobile Public Schools' Environmental Studies Center for January's total Lunar eclipse.

Late in the afternoon of eclipse day, Thursday, January 20th, I was shocked to peek out of the house, look up, and actually see blue sky! It has become a truism at the MAS that anytime we plan a public star party, even if it's scheduled during the middle of a drought, the skies will cloud and it *will* rain. This one time we were spared however. I packed my Celestron Ultima C8 into the trunk of my car and headed for the ESC. I have a number of telescopes to choose from, and have tried everything from small equatorial Newtonians to my 12.5" Dobsonian, but I have found that the best scope for use with the public, and particularly small children, is a Schmidt Cassegrain. The combination of the convenient

eyepiece placement—no need for a step-stool, even for the smallest squeakers—and the drive—you don't have to slow things down to continually recenter the objects—makes the ubiquitous SCT a public star party *monster*.

Arriving at the site just at sundown, Marv Uphaus and I found the ESC's Dianne Martin talking to a WALA TV ("Fox 10") newscrew. The Channel 10 folks remained at the ESC with us for the remainder of the evening and interviewed several club members, resulting in some nice free publicity for the MAS.

Before long, kids, lots of kids, and their parents began descending on the ESC. In past times, Dianne has publicized these public star parties in the local media. Unfortunately, as time went on, we began attracting crowds of 1000+ people to the events. 1000 kids, parents and interested passerby is really too much for Dianne, the other ESC staff, and us, the MAS, to deal with. With this in mind, schools were informed about this Eclipse Star Gaze, but we didn't push it on radio and



TV. This resulted in a still sizable but manageable crowd of about 300 people.

One potential problem with this star party was that the total phase of the eclipse did not begin until relatively late. We knew that we'd need to keep our visitors entertained until then. Luckily, we had a very good turnout of MAS members for the event, with about 10 scopes being set up by the time things really got underway. With Jupiter and Saturn in the sky, we really had no lack of wonders to show off, either. Many of us also turned our scopes to some of the brighter deep sky objects--like M42 and some of the other pretty denizens of the star-spangled Winter Milky Way. Actually, though, our young charges never seemed to tire of just the "plain old" full Moon. I had many kids and adults request the Moon again and again. And I must admit it was a striking—if blinding—sight in a 38mm 2" eyepiece in my SCT.

Eventually, the total part of the eclipse got started. I was amazed at how many people hung on for the main event. The temperatures on this evening were in the 30s, and a very chill wind would occasionally whip up, blowing across Pine Lake. As for the eclipse itself, it was very satisfying. I'd rate its darkness as about medium—bright enough to show off the striking blood red color imparted to the Moon by the Earth's atmosphere, and dark enough to really "look like an eclipse." As our visitors began to drift home, I managed to shoot quite a few color pictures of the total phase.

All in all, a very satisfying event. Thanks to Dianne Martin's tireless efforts, everything came off just perfectly. We MAS members had a great time, and many little folk got their first glimpse of the night sky's marvels. Let's hope that the ESC survives the current round of budget cuts threatening the Mobile Public Schools, and that Dianne and her colleagues continue their wonderful

job of introducing our area's children to the natural world, both through special events like this and through their hard work each and every day!

Thanks for Astronomy

Marv Uphaus

Last night I went outside to put out the garbage. As I was walking to the dumpster, I looked up and saw the constellation, Orion, shining brightly in the sky. It struck me that a little more than two years ago when I walked outside, if I did look up, I would not have recognized Orion. And it brought to light just how much I have learned during the last two years.

Whether you know it or not, we are a VERY special group of people. Those of us who have had the opportunity to discover astronomy, star gazing - whatever you want to call it - have been blessed. When we get mired down in choosing eyepieces, installing digital setting circles, or trying to decide which star charts to buy, we tend to forget exactly what we have been given.

It has been said that when people stop learning, they die. If I keep on learning like I have over the past two years, I'll be around for a LONG time. Two years ago, I was like most people - not able to find much more in the night sky than the big dipper. Now I know several dozen constellations, where to find the Andromeda Galaxy and the Beehive cluster, know what Messier objects are, what the New General Catalog is and a raft of other things astronomical.

In the process I've gone to telescope stores and planetariums and observatories, star parties and meetings. I've met professional and amateur astronomers. I've made new friends and renewed old

friendships. I've read and read and read, and spent money and more money. I was searching for something new to capture my imagination when I discovered astronomy. It has broadened my horizons beyond my wildest imagination. I now understand that to live on a planet orbiting a star in a globular cluster would eliminate my view of the universe beyond that globular cluster. I know that the happy coincidence - or was it a planned thing - of living on this planet rotating around this rather ordinary star, our sun, has made it possible to KNOW that there is a vast universe out there.

Time travel has been the subject of many science fiction novels and movies as well as sparking the curiosity of every physicist and astronomer alive. Yet each night when we point our telescopes skyward, we participate a tiny bit in time travel. The light from that Andromeda Galaxy that comes to us tonight left there 2.3 million years ago. Each supernova that we observe occurred eons ago, but the light is just reaching our eyes now. We are looking back in time.

At one moment we are reading the latest in astrophysics discoveries on the Internet or in Astronomy magazine, and the next we are out under the night sky discovering the same things that Messier and Herschel discovered centuries ago. We use centuries old techniques of mirrors and lenses coupled with leading edge technologies of microprocessors, CCD imaging chips and wide angle eyepiece design with multiple anti-reflection coatings. And some of you have been doing this for decades and others have been doing it for only months. Some of you are professional scientists and engineers and some of you are not technically oriented.

It's a wide and varied group in a wide and varied science and one that has something for everyone.

But everyone gets something out of this avocation if only the ability to go outside to the dumpster and look up and understand a little more of what we see and what's really out there.

So, tonight, I'd like to give thanks for my last two plus years of learning. I look forward to many more years of the same. I'd like you to join with me and give thanks for the people who developed all the wonderful astronomical products that help us enjoy the night sky. And I'd also like you to join me in giving thanks for the night sky. I expect to enjoy it for many more years. But mostly tonight, I'd like to give thanks for all the people who I have had the pleasure of meeting and observing with over the past two plus years. Many of them are here tonight. I ask all of you to join me in giving thanks for all these things.

LensPen Mania

Rod Mollise

Available From Many Photo And Variety Retailers

<http://www.lenspen.com>

Every once in a while a new product comes along that it so strikingly innovative and useful that it becomes a fixture of amateur astronomy from that time forward. The LensPen® is one of these products. I started hearing about LensPens just before the 1997 Texas Star Party. At this time, Celestron had begun advertising these devices as being perfect for cleaning eyepieces and other lens-type optics used by amateur astronomers (the LensPen is NOT intended for cleaning first surface mirrors of any kind). According to Celestron, the LensPen, which was being sold with a "Celestron" label on it, would clean the grungiest eyepiece far better than normal techniques. Me, I was skeptical. I

doubted both the efficacy and safety of this thing. I wasn't about to use anything other than Kodak lens tissue on my beloved oculars.

At TSP, though, I got a chance to see the LensPen in action. Renowned visual deep sky observer Barbara Wilson was using one to clean her collection of eyepieces. Watching Barbara and talking to her it became obvious that the LensPen worked great. She showed me the soft retractable brush on one end of the pen that was used to sweep away potentially scratch-causing grit before applying the LensPen's cleaning tip to the eyepiece, allaying some of my fears. Barbara's



eyepieces definitely looked scratch free and very squeaky clean. The only drawback I could see to this device was the fact that it left a small amount of dry residue on the surface of the lens after cleaning was complete. This residue was in the form of small particles of carbon, the LensPen's cleaning compound, and was easily brushed away.

I forgot about LensPen for a while—for a year or two, in fact, until one day when I was browsing through Pensacola's Nature Company store. They were selling LensPens, and the price certainly seemed right. Why not take a chance? I figured I'd try the device on a couple of old Meade Modified Achromat eyepieces before using it on my better oculars.

At home, I glanced over the directions. Seemed simple enough. Extend the brush, brush off any large contaminants, return the brush to its retracted position, and remove

the cap on the other end of the LensPen to reveal the cleaning tip. The working end of the LensPen is a round, supersoft disk that is about 10mm in diameter. All that's necessary to clean your eyepiece—or any other lens—is to gently rub its surface with the LensPen's tip in smooth, gentle circular motions. If your lens is VERY dirty, you may apply a little breath condensation to the eyepiece before using the tip to help the process along.

When you're done, I think you'll be amazed. Oil, fingerprints, mascara, all fall easily to the LensPen. It's much easier than using lens tissues, and, in my experience, much more effective. I noticed that the problem I'd observed with the LensPen leaving a carbon residue had apparently been fixed. I've never had to dust off my eyepieces after cleaning, anyway. The manufacturer does say that you may notice a little residue after a particularly dirty lens has been cleaned. When you're finished cleaning, you replace the cap on the pen's tip and twist it. This renews the disk's carbon-based cleanser.

Problems? The only one I experienced was size. The original LensPen's 10mm tip made it difficult to use on the small lenses of short focal length eyepieces. The LensPen company, which now sells the Pens under its own name, has recently introduced a new version, the "Mini-Pro," however. This model has a tip 5mm in diameter, half that of the original, making it much more efficacious for cleaning of small lenses. Safety? I've never noticed any problems of any kind attributable to the LensPen—in two years of use. The manufacturer states in its literature that "Lab tests and user testimonials prove LensPen is safe for all lenses..." I've even used my LensPen to remove small areas of dirt/contamination from the corrector plate of my beloved SCT. How long will a LensPen last? The vendor says that it can remove at least 500

fingerprints with no discernable loss of cleaning quality, so it should last most amateur astronomers a very long time.

I know I'm satisfied with the LensPen, and it's been a boon for me. Excuse me for chirping, but all my lenses, including those on my cameras, are cleaner now than they've ever been. As far as I'm concerned, that little Kodak-Orange envelope of tissues and the bottle of cleaning fluid are things of the past—at least for as cleaning lenses of any kind. If you'd like a LensPen demo, let me know at the next star party and I'll show you what this inexpensive little accessory can do!

Observing the wondrous southern skies from beautiful Africa! That's just a dream for most of us...but Rod's buddy, South African astronomer Bill Hollenbach, does it all the time...at least we can experience things vicariously thanks to Bill's

Letters From Africa



From: wjh@iafrica.com (Bill Hollenbach)

To: RMOLLISE@AOL.COM

HI Rod:

I have been in the Kruger National Park for a couple of days, at

Skukuza Camp. This was an experience that I will not easily forget.

I met my Swiss friends at Johannesburg Airport, and rested at the dam for a day, as he has some back problems. We arrived at Skukuza and unpacked the caravan (Mobile Home, I think you call it), and I immediately set up the scopes. We went for supper at the luxurious restaurant that is available there, right on the banks of the magnificent river and overlooking the Bushveld. The park is something to visit, when the "Eclipse Hunters" come out in 2001 and 2002. We walked back to the site and by the time we arrived, the skies looked like black velvet with sugar crystals sprinkled over it. My friend , Rene, was a bit disturbed about the Hyenas patrolling outside the fences, looking for scraps. As we were exhausted from the whole day on the road, we did not spend much time observing. I set the scope on Jupiter and was pleased to see 8 belts on it and the shadow of one of it's moons. All our "whoops and aaah's" quickly drew the attention of the other campers and soon we had an "astro" show on the go. The Hyena's howling (giggling/laughing) the distant roar of the Lions made this a night to remember.

The next day, disaster !!!!! We got up early (0400) to get ready to drive. Rene could not move, as his disc in his back had popped out. He decided to spend the day in the camp, resting and doing physio, hoping it would rectify itself. It did not, and they were forced to take the plane to Durban for medical help. That night there was a lightning storm that sounded like the center of a battlefield. I will be leaving for the Bushveld in a short time (1 week) and then I hope to somehow get established on the internet. I intend running an Astro Camp on the Lapalala Game reserve, but more about that, once the agreement has been reached between Clive Walker and myself. THAT is going to be

something unique in Africa and the world: A Public Observatory in a Game Reserve.

Peace my man,
Bill Hollenbach

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Bushveld"
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My Back Pages



Astropoem

Planet Caravan

All the wanderers are sinking,
Huddling 'round Ol' Sol,
Planet Caravan, Yeah!
Perfect fodder for
The unscrupulously
Ambitious.
Time to shear gullible sheep
Who can't see it
But do hear (they think)
The rumble of
Fear
In its
Passing.
Planet Caravan, yeah!

--Rod

Editor's Musings: Once Upon a Midnight Dreary

Do you like to observe the deep sky? Do you like astronomy software? If the answer to these questions is "yes," you owe it to yourself to check out Steve Tuma's incredible Deepsky 2000 (<http://www.deepsky.com>). Yes, I know, I've promised an in depth review of 2000, and that will come, soon! Scout's honor!

As some of you know, I'm now finishing up a book on Schmidt Cassegrain Telescopes (SCTs) for Springer-Verlag. Because of this, *Skywatch* has been a little skinny lately. I

hope to be able to return it to its former glory soon, though! Remember, too, that I welcome (or "beg for" is more like it) any and all submissions—help me out, huh? Any aspect of amateur astronomy, from observing; to equipment; to your poems, stories, and essays about the night sky and your feelings about it are perfect candidates for inclusion in *Skywatch*. **Does anybody like to draw cartoons?** Something I've wanted to include in *Skywatch* for a long time is an astronomy-related cartoon panel or strip.

Hope to see many of you at this year's Peach State Star Gaze (April 6-9). If you're a member of my sct-user Internet mailing list, we hope to have an informal meeting at PSSG...looks like quite a few familiar names from sct-user will be there.

One of the projects I've been involved with for the last year is the *Secrets of the Universe* cards. These are full color, slick paper notebook pages on astronomy and space. You may have seen similar cards (in the junk mail pile) on cars, warplanes, etc. The publisher, M-Press of London, is serious about doing this well, as am I and the other writers working on this project (my "beat" is usually observatories, other astronomical technology, and the shallow sky—the Moon, planets and atmospheric phenomena). Steve Tonkin, a name familiar to many of you from s.a.a., as well as his astronomy books is also working on *Secrets*. Teenagers and pre-teens interested in the "Great Out There" may, in particular, find these cards engaging (as will many astronomy novices of all ages). And no, I don't get any extra money for saying this! ☺

As the time approached for another issue of Skywatch, I was starting to get panicky. No Beavis. No Butt-head. Apparently they were off on another lunatic tour of America. No B&B, of course, means no hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar. No mayo jar means no Rumours. But, just as I was sadly

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musing on this, came a faint tapping on the front door of Chaos Manor South. Could it be? Opening the portal revealed (thank heavens) not Beavis and Butt-head, but their female acquaintances Lolita and Tanqueray ("Uhh, we don't own this trailer, we jus' rent it!"). "Hah, Mr. Rod. I'm Lolita an' this here is Tanqueray. Those dumb boys done lef' this at the trailer. Sed to give it to you." With that, Miss Lolita handed over the much-missed container holding the latest...

Rumours

Are you ready for another round in the goto wars?

Everybody assumed they'd do it, but now it's a reality. Celestron is releasing an 8 inch \$1900.00 version of their impressive Nexstar 5 this month. The Nexstar 8, disappointingly to some, features the *very same* single-arm fork mount used on the 5. Most NS5 users do report that this mounting is very steady, so it may work well on an 8 inch SCT. We'll see. For now, Celestron is apparently going to continue producing the higher priced Ultima 2000, feeling astro imagers may prefer its worm gear drive and double fork. Also past rumor-stage is reputed to be an 11 inch (and maybe even 14 inch) Nexstar. These two will apparently (and understandably) use a more conventional double arm fork.

The question here is "How will Meade react?" Will they allow Celestron to trump them again (as they did in the NS5-ETX 125 battle)? Or will Meade respond with a new 8 inch goto scope? The LX-200 is certainly growing long in the tooth, and I've expected to hear 'bout an LX-300 or LX-400 for some time now.

Spectra-Astro-Systems is no more. Dan Gordon had operated SAS for many years, providing honest and friendly service to amateurs. In addition to his own products, Dan also dealt many high priced and high quality items not handled by many other dealers, like Losmandy's big "HG" mounts. Apparently, Dan and Co. stopped responding to email and phone calls not long ago. One s.a.a. member who lives in the area drove by the SAS place of business and reportedly found it

vacated. Now the rumor is that Spectra has indeed declared bankruptcy. Just hope there weren't too many folks with outstanding orders, and they don't get burned too badly (*always pay with credit cards when dealing with any mail-order astronomy merchant, folks*).

Roland Christen has finally gone and done it. If you haven't heard, the long-rumored Maksutovs (MCTs) from AstroPhyics are now a reality. Stop by the AP website for a gander, but, as usual for Uncle Roland's stuff, the prices and the quality are both high.

Many amateurs have been impressed by Japanese Telescope maker Vixen's products and distressed at sole U.S. dealer Orion's small selection of same. Good news time: Orion states they will now "special order" Vixen equipment. Prices, etc., are between you and the big "O"...I haven't heard specifics yet. Speaking of prices, have you seen what Orion is charging for the latest Vixen semi-APO "Neo Achromat" refractors it's now importing? How about one of these 140mm jobs on a computerized Vixen Atlux mount? If you have to ask the price, well, you can't afford it!

--*The Anonymous Astronomer*

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