

NOVAC

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA ASTRONOMY CLUB

NO. 134 • VOL. 30 • MAY/JUNE 2008

NOVAC Astronomy Day May 2008

By Rob McKinney

Mix together about 100 NOVAC amateur astronomers, two superb guest speakers, a State Park an hour away from D.C. with slopes giving excellent Southern views, and a miraculous break in drought-breaking rains and what do you get? Astronomy Day 2008 observed at Sky Meadows!

For the second year NOVAC was hosted by Jean Johnston and her park staff on the flanks of the Blue Ridge Mountains. And for the second year we were favored by great weather, but only after our first guest speaker began his talk. The otherwise dreary and damp day gave way to clear blue skies as Steve Squyres recapped the Mars Rover missions (and shared the fate of graduate students). Following his talk, Warren Coker of Sky Meadows presented NOVAC the park's appreciation for last year's event and for the special work by Lyle Mars and John Stewart in refurbishing the park's 12 in. GEM-mounted reflector (Warren used that scope later to show visitors views of Saturn). The hundreds of volunteer hours contributed by NOVAC helps the park with public programming and is very welcomed by Sky Meadows. Paul Heuper capped off the day's talks with his pre-

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Astronomy Software

By Sean Welton, Visual Astronomy
www.visualastronomy.com

Sometimes in amateur astronomy, a computer and appropriate software can be a very helpful thing. Take for example the following case, which is very similar to my own situation right now. You haven't observed in weeks, due to being busy at work (and having no vacation days left), and you finally get a chance to go out to the telescope. Once you've got your fancy 'scope all set up, you realize the sky has changed drastically since last time you observed. A session planning software would make a great addition to your gear at this point. Maybe you're new to the hobby, or just fooling around in some spare time. Astronomy software can also help teach new observers about the most interesting night sky objects and how to find them. In the following article, we'll take a look at some commercial and shareware programs that can help you out when you're at the 'scope.

The software I personally use the most is called Stellarium (www.stellarium.org/). Stellarium is an open-source, cross-platform software. This means it is free and available for Windows, Mac, and Linux computers. This is also the reason I use Stellarium quite a bit. I run Linux on all of my own computers, so it is a major plus for me. Stellarium is good at projecting a lifelike sky on your computer screen. The

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*Message from the President will
return in the July/August issue*



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sentation on exoplanets, those extra-solar planets being discovered in droves and the biology that might exist beyond our own home planet.

Then dusk crept over the pastures and tree-clad hillsides and the real observing began. Bill Burton helped visitors visualize our place in space with his constellation and "what's up" talks as darkness fell, then NOVAC members offered views of Mars and Saturn, the Beehive and M13, and various galaxies in Ursa Major, Leo and Virgo to families, Scouts and each other.

While the weather discouraged some of the public from sharing the night sky, we still had a nice turnout and NOVAC members commented the seeing was very good most the night. Red lights and the whirl of go-to systems filled the quiet, and moon-

light on mown grass and the Milky Way rimmed view overhead were ample reward for those who made trip to the park.

Guest speakers were arranged by Allan Mayer and Lyle Mars. Notable among the volunteers were Lyle Mars and Richard Grauel, and the time and energy from all the volunteers (Kevin O'Neill, David Eastin, Yvette Johnson, Robin Rohrback and Nick, Ward Trussell, Dave Sukites, Bobbie Stewart, Cenk Ozmen, Myles Rice, Elias Sanchez, Larry Angrimson, Milt Roney, Ralph Fischi, Donna Blosser, Deb Stover, Gayathri Cheran, Ed Duclos, Kirk Ingvaldstat, Dennis Troupe, Frank Strack, Kent Allingham and Patricia Rostkowski) made the event a success. ★



ASTRONOMY DAY • MAY 2008



On Astronomy Day I had the pleasure of presenting Greg Piepol the first AL Outreach Award (Stellar) given to a NOVAC member. Greg has become very well known as the "Sungazer" with his photos, web and magazine credits, presentations, and all-round professional outreach focused on the Sun. He's a great example of that part of NOVAC's mission statement that says "...and to help others observe."

I remember the first Outreach activity I participated in back in 2002 with Greg, Ed Witkowski and one or two others. It was a neat thing to share our hobby with a Scout group in Kensington, and sharing astronomy has been a highlight of my membership with NOVAC. It has certainly been more than that for Greg who seems to have made a second career of Outreach and we're very proud of his award.

Having handed Greg his pin and certificate, I began wondering how many NOVACians have received AL recognition for their hours under the stars. The AL website shows that 88 awards have gone to club members, but a closer look at the list shows a double handful who've received multiple awards (see list). The list also shows that pursuit of awards has been fairly steady, with spikes in 2001 and 2002 when awards broke into the double digits.

Of course, some of this recognition came after years of observing, so the rate of awards doesn't necessarily reflect a surge in observing. But it might, depending on weather patterns, astronomical events that spurred enthusiasm, and of course, your awareness that the time you spend and the notes you keep from your observing can result in peer recognition.

I was asked if there was a time limit between your observing effort and your award submittal. No, there isn't. If you have complete observing logs that span a long period, or that you put away years ago, it doesn't matter. If you made the observations and documented your experience according

to the AL requirements (see the AL webpage at <http://www.astroleague.org/observing.html> for details on each "club"), you can receive credit.

It would be wonderful to see your name added to the list of accomplished observers in our club. Please let me know how I can help you earn your AL observing award. *



Name	Observing Club & Level	Certificate Number	Date
Brenda Jones	Binocular Messier Club	130	1993-10-04
Bob Hambleton	Binocular Messier Club	133	1993-10-15
Brenda C. Jones	Messier Club	1198	1994-03-20
E. E. Sanders, Jr.	Messier Club	1205	1994-03-30
Kevin B. Jones	Binocular Messier Club	162	1994-07-11
Kevin B. Jones	Messier Club	1224	1994-07-25
Michael Lucas	Messier Club	1251	1994-10-25
Jon Stewart-Taylor	Binocular Messier Club	178	1995-01-05
Jeff Stetekluh	Messier Club	1357	1995-11-08
Jeff Stetekluh	Messier Club Honorary	1357	1995-11-08
Jon Stewart-Taylor	Messier Club	1362	1995-11-17
William C. Bryson	Messier Club	1426	1996-07-18
William C. Bryson	Messier Club Honorary	1426	1996-07-18
Michael Lucas	Messier Club Honorary	1251	1996-12-12
Craig Tupper	Messier Club Honorary	1481	1997-03-12
Craig Tupper	Messier Club	1481	1997-03-12
Dr. Peter Gruber	Messier Club Honorary	1525	1997-08-24
Dr. Peter Gruber	Messier Club	1525	1997-08-24
Steven Blake	Messier Club	1526	1997-08-24
Dr. Peter Gruber	Lunar Club	74	1997-09-22
Ronald Cook	Binocular Messier Club	311	1997-11-14
Donna Blosser	Lunar Club	80	1997-11-15
Ronald W. Cook	Lunar Club	101	1998-05-12
Steven Blake	Messier Club Honorary	1526	1998-05-25
William C. Bryson	Herschel 400 Club	165	1998-06-06
Fred Matthies	Binocular Messier Club	339	1998-06-26
Ron Mickle	Messier Club	1612	1998-08-18
Stephen Blake	Urban Observing Club	6	1999-02-04

Name	Observing Club & Level	Certificate Number	Date
Lewis P. Cason	Lunar Club	172	1999-06-04
George E. Karch	Binocular Messier Club	402	1999-11-28
Laquetta A. Karch	Binocular Messier Club	401	1999-11-28
Jim Fitzgerald	Lunar Club	208	2000-01-15
George E. Karch	Lunar Club	207	2000-01-15
Robert A. Hand	Double Star Club	107	2000-02-15
John C. Avellone	Messier Club Honorary	1729	2000-03-12
John C. Avellone	Messier Club	1729	2000-03-12
William Bryson	Herschel II Club	15M	2000-06-02
Michael Edmonds	Messier Club Honorary	1777	2000-09-20
Michael Edmonds	Messier Club	1777	2000-09-20
Jonathan Bein	Messier Club	1849	2001-04-22
Jonathan Bein	Messier Club Honorary	1849	2001-04-22
Rob Lentini	Messier Club	1863	2001-06-05
Robert A. Hand	Messier Club	1859	2001-06-05
Robert A. Hand	Messier Club Honorary	1859	2001-06-05
George E. Karch	Messier Club	1887	2001-09-01
George E. Karch	Messier Club Honorary	1887	2001-09-01
Laquetta Karch	Sunspotters Club	40	2001-09-01
Kevin A. Beamer	Messier Club Honorary	1907	2001-12-16
Kevin A. Beamer	Messier Club	1907	2001-12-16
Robert Bunge	Arp Peculiar Galaxy Club	20V	2001-12-23
Pedro Martinez, Jr.	Binocular Messier Club	499	2002-06-19
George E. Karch	Deep Sky Binocular Club	136	2002-06-20
Ellen Bryson	Messier Club	1968	2002-06-21
Ellen Bryson	Messier Club Honorary	1968	2002-06-21
Laquetta A. Karch	Messier Club	1962	2002-06-21
Laquetta A. Karch	Messier Club Honorary	1962	2002-06-21
George E. Karch	Sunspotters Club	55	2002-06-21
Tom Littlejohn	Herschel 400 Club	263	2002-10-11
Tom Littlejohn	Urban Observing Club	39	2002-10-13
Lewis P. Cason, M.D.	Binocular Messier Club	538	2002-10-13
William C. Bryson Arp	Peculiar Galaxy Club	24V	2002-10-20
Tom Littlejohn	Messier Club Honorary	2008	2002-11-25
Lewis P. Cason	Messier Club	2001	2002-11-25
Tom Littlejohn	Messier Club	2008	2002-11-25
Laquetta Karch	Deep Sky Binocular Club	153	2003-06-16
Ed Seward	Messier Club	2071	2003-07-06
William R. Stewart	Binocular Messier Club	586	2003-09-29
Donna Blosser	Messier Club	2104	2003-10-06
Phillip Awtrey	Messier Club	2111	2003-11-13
Donna Blosser	Messier Club Honorary	2104	2004-03-01
Ed Seward	Messier Club Honorary	2071	2004-06-01
Laquetta Karch	Urban Observing Club	64	2004-06-24
P. Chewning Toulmin	Binocular Messier Club	626	2004-08-14
Jim Biggins	Messier Club	2171	2004-08-21
Pedro Martinez, Jr.	Double Star Club	287	2005-01-17
Laquetta Karch	Lunar Club	445	2005-02-10
Jim Biggins	Messier Club Honorary	2171	2005-07-13
Pedro Martinez, Jr.	Urban Observing Club	87	2006-01-08
Pedro Martinez, Jr.	Messier Club	2271	2006-01-11
Pedro Martinez, Jr.	Messier Club Honorary	2271	2006-01-11
Art Fritzon	Binocular Messier Club	722	2006-03-28
John Car Lyle Mars	Messier Club Honorary	2316	2006-10-10
John Car Lyle Mars	Messier Club	2316	2006-10-10
Ralph Marple	Herschel 400 Club	364	2007-05-07
Peter John Keleher	Messier Club	2355	2007-06-15
Tom Finkenbinder	Messier Club	2370	2007-07-30
Greg Piepol	Outreach Club Basic	0185O	2008-02-26
Greg Piepol	Outreach Club Stellar	0185S	2008-02-26

Be a Mentor, Seek a Mentor

NOVAC's motto is "Observe and Help Others Observe". To emphasize the latter, we have a mentor program.

The goal of the mentor program is to join experienced observers with beginning and intermediate observers who feel they want to improve their observing skills, or even just learn to operate their equipment. This is a very important part of the club's capabilities. After all, why join a club if you can't utilize the experience of its members, or share your own expertise.

You don't need to be the world's foremost expert on equipment or observing technique to be a mentor. If you feel you have some knowledge to offer, believe it or not there are people who can benefit from that knowledge. If you feel you would like to be a mentor but don't have the time, that won't be an issue. You can be an effective mentor even if you only have an hour or two a month to devote.

You also don't need to be a true beginner to request a mentor. You can be an expert on the sky, but are interested in upgrading your equipment or diving into the world of astrophotography. Likewise, you may have a telescope and know how to use it but would like to learn the sky better or learn how to sketch planets. The mentor program can be for everyone.

Young or old, new or experienced, this program is for everybody. If you would like to meet with a mentor, or think you would like to be a mentor, or have any questions about the program, write to: mentor@novac.com.

Clear skies
Jeffrey Topp
NOVAC Mentor
Program Director

NOVAC Members Represent

Family Day, April 19 at the Air and Space Museum



Dr. William Pala (right) and Milt Roney represented the International Dark Sky Association on light pollution issues.

Many thanks to Milt Roney for providing photos of this event.



John Stewart explains a telescope to some children.

Astronomy Software *continued from page 1*

constellations and objects are labeled, and there are many display options. It will also simulate eclipses, and there is a meteors option. Some planetariums even use Stellarium to render their shows. Displaying the sky is one of the few features of Stellarium, however. There are some scripts available for it that provide new features, but some of the features of commercial software are missing.

If you want some of the nicer features, however, you're going to want to invest in some commercial astronomy software. Such a software is a great investment in your hobby, as it will make your observing sessions more organized. You may even learn some new stuff! Starry Night (www.starrynightstore.com/) is a program that works somewhat like Stellarium, but includes many more useful features. Starry Night is available in several different versions, ranging from beginner to expert. Starry Night Enthusiast Version allows

users to explore a 3-D model of the entire universe, and zoom in on planets, stars, nebulae, and other objects. It even allows you to track space probes as they roam through space. Starry Night Pro Version adds the ability to plan viewing sessions. It also will allow tracking of artificial satellites (such as the space station) using any computerized telescope mount and an adapter. Now that is cool... For those of you into astrophotography, they also offer an AstroPhoto Suite that can organize and improve your imaging sessions. Starry Night software is currently on sale, so check it out while it lasts!

Also worth mentioning is a list of open source and free programs at Midnight Kite (www.midnightkite.com/software.html). On this page, there are many, many programs, each of which is specialized in doing one calculation or another. This page is definitely worth checking out. If you need a program or script for your

observatory, its probably there. Sky and Telescope also offer some free programs, such as Mars Previewer II, Binoplan, Cool, Flex, and Sec. All of these programs perform specific tasks and are available at www.skyandtelescope.com/resources/software/3304921.html. I have personally found the Mars Previewer II to be very useful in determining if you really did see that feature on the red planet's surface.

I hope this article has been of some help to you in organizing and improving your sessions with the help of computer software. Of course, this is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. Therefore, expect more software articles as I discover new pieces of software that can help you get more out of your observing time.

Clear skies! ★

This content distributed by the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO) Writer's Bureau.

Do you have a story to tell?

Members are encouraged to submit photos, articles, tips and reviews of books, software and equipment. If you would like to submit an article for publication send an email to newsletters@novac.com.

"To observe, and to help others observe"

NOVAC is a non-profit, all-volunteer organization chartered to advance amateur astronomy in Northern Virginia. Members benefit from:

Access to dark sky observing sites:

NOVAC maintains agreements that provide club members with year-round access to observing sites away from city lights

Monthly meetings

Monthly meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the second Sunday of each month in Room 80 of the Enterprise Building on the campus of George Mason University. Each meeting features a lecture on an interesting topic by a local expert. See the web page or future newsletters for a schedule of speakers.

Bimonthly newsletter

The NOVAC newsletter provides information specifically for NOVAC members, as well as general interest articles on such topics as observing reports, equipment reviews, upcoming events, ATM projects, and more.

High-quality telescopes to borrow

NOVAC members may borrow one of the clubs several "loaner" telescopes at no charge. Members may choose from among three 6 in. reflectors, two 10 in. f/6 reflectors, an 8 in. SCT, and a hydrogen-alpha solar scope. Binoculars are also available for loan.

Club website

Up to date information about club events and activities is maintained on the club website at www.novac.com.

Large club library

NOVAC maintains a well stocked library that members may borrow from by contacting John Deriso (olgazer@verizon.net). A full list of titles is available from the club website.

Private email listserv

Members keep up with current club information by subscribing to the NOVAC email list, without fear of flame wars or spam emails.

Public outreach opportunities

Several times each year, volunteers from NOVAC present astronomy programs to schools, churches, Scout troops, and other public groups.

Membership in the Astronomical League

Through NOVAC's membership in the Astronomical League, NOVAC members gain access to the AL's newsletter, services, and observing programs.

Discounts on astronomy magazines

Subscriptions to *Sky & Telescope* and *Astronomy* magazines are offered to club members at a considerable discount. Contact Kent Allingham (see contact info at right).

Mentor Program

Young or old, new or experienced, this program is for everybody. If you would like to meet with a mentor, or think you would like to be a mentor, or have any questions about the program, write to: mentor@novac.com.

See your Membership Guide for more details.



The NOVAC Newsletter is the official publication of the Northern Virginia Astronomy Club and is published six times per year. The NOVAC Newsletter is sent to members of NOVAC as a regular membership benefit.

Membership

Membership in the Northern Virginia Astronomy Club is \$30.00 per year and is open to anyone interested in astronomy or the sciences. Additional memberships at the same address without additional copies of the newsletter are \$5.00 per person. Contact:

Kent Allingham
3510 Country Hill Drive
Fairfax, VA 22030
kent.allingham@verizonbusiness.com

Change of address

All notices of change of address should be sent to Kent Allingham. Please include both old and new addresses.

Advertising

NOVAC does not knowingly accept advertising for products of inferior quality nor does it accept responsibility for the quality of advertised products.

Submissions to the newsletter

NOVAC members are invited to submit articles for publication in the NOVAC Newsletter. The editor reserves the right to edit all materials submitted. Send article submissions to the Editor, Tim Nicholson, at newsletters@novac.com.

The deadline for submissions is two weeks in advance of publication: August 15, 2008 for the July/August 2008 newsletter.

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Next Meeting

August 10, 2008, 7 p.m.

Program TBA

General membership meetings are open to the public, and are held at Enterprise Hall, room 80, on the campus of George Mason University (see www.novac.com for directions) in Fairfax, Virginia. The meeting hall is in the basement floor of the building. Since Parking Lot B is now closed, you should park across the street in the far reaches of the Patriot Center's parking lot, then walk up the path to the rear of Enterprise Hall.

NOVAC Needs You!!!

NOVAC has a great corps of volunteers, and needs their help. Every year NOVAC hosts two premier public events, *Astronomy Day* and *The Star Gaze*.

This year's Star Gaze will take place on October 4th at Crockett Park. NOVAC has an urgent need for an Event Coordinator and other volunteers to help at Astronomy Day. If you can help, please contact me at president@novac.com.

*Thank You
Ed Witkowski
NOVAC, President*

Upcoming Events

**September 26-28, 2008
SJAC Fall Star Party**

New Jersey
members.aol.com/sjastroc/fall1.html

**October 4, 2008
NOVAC's Star Gaze**

Crockett Park
www.NOVAC.com

**Oct. 27 - Nov. 2, 2008
Mid-Atlantic Star Party**

North Carolina
masp.org/location.htm

Non-Profit Org.
US Postage Paid
Reston, VA
Permit No. 6595



c/o Kent Allingham, Membership Director
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