



AU AstroNews

The Newsletter of the Astronomical Unit

July 2003

Sponsored by the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

AU Picnic Report

The June 2003 AU Picnic had great attendance, with almost 40 people gathering to munch goodies. A special treat was arranged by Tony Galván. He and Gabriele from Eyes on the Sky brought Max (a Great Horned Owl) and Ivan (a Redtail Hawk). Tony just had hip replacement surgery and is looking for some crutches he could borrow for a couple of months. If so, please contact him at galvan@dosgatos.com.



RTMC Report

RTMC 2003 in Big Bear over Memorial Day weekend saw the usual contingent of AU attendees, plus some surprises. Warren, Ceci, and Liliana Bitters, Joe Brown, Joe Doyle, Art Harris, Pat & Chuck McPartlin, Edgar Ocampo, and John West were joined by Dave Kary and Joann Eisberg and Annie, plus Matt and Yessie Thomas with their new baby. We camped in the usual AU enclave on the meadow next to Kiran Mehra from Ridgecrest. None of the door prizes this year went to anyone from the Bitters clan, breaking their two-year streak. Edgar Ocampo came home with the prize this year. Below is a picture of Dave and Joann with Pat and Edgar.



June Outreach Volunteers

June was a quiet outreach month after the hectic days of May. AU volunteers John Boyd, Dora Drake, Art Harris, Pat & Chuck McPartlin, Edgar Ocampo, Helen Osenga, Craig & Kenyan Prater, Jim Williams, and Tim Wittenburg were joined by Dave Kary & Joann Eisberg in showing the wonders of the sky to 386 customers.

AU Events for July

Thursday, July 10, setup 8:00 PM – Telescopes for Los Padres Family Camp for disadvantaged children. This will probably be at Paradise Campground, but may move to Sage Hill Campground up the road by the Ranger Station. We won't know until the last minute, so if nobody is at Paradise, try Sage Hill. Estimated at 50 kids/parents.

Friday, July 11, setup 8:30 PM – Slide show and scopes for Cachuma Lake Campgrounds. Scopes set up at Dakota Plains.

Saturday, July 12, 8:30 PM – Monthly Public Star Party at SBMNH.

Friday, July 18, 8:30 PM – Monthly Public Observation at Westmont College's Van Kampen Observatory.

Saturday, July 19, setup 8:00 PM – Telescopes for Los Padres Family Camp for disadvantaged children. This will probably be at Paradise Campground, but may move to Sage Hill Campground up the road by the Ranger Station. We won't know until the last minute, so if nobody is at Paradise, try Sage Hill. Estimated at 35 kids/parents.

Friday, July 25, setup 7:30 PM – Family Astronomy Night at Elings Park.

Saturday, July 26, setup 8:00 PM – Telescopes for Refugio Beach State Campground.

Saturday, July 26, all night – Dark sky observing.
Contact Paul Winn (strg8zn@cox.net) or Joe Doyle to find out where and when.

Note: There will be no planning meeting in July. The next planning meeting will be Saturday, August 9, 2003.

Scheduled events are subject to change and additions with little notice! For the latest and greatest, contact Edgar Ocampo (eocampo26@earthlink.net) or Chuck McPartlin (macpuzl@west.net) for the latest developments.

The Capture of a Leonid Firefly

Laurence Harms wrote the following poem in January 2002, after he returned from Guam to view the Great Leonid Meteor Storm of November 19, 2001. The third and fourth verses refer to when he went to Russ Camera to pick up his slides. He really didn't think he had captured a "Leonid Firefly", but he did. It was very faint. Thanks, Laurence!

*Although the night was stormy
And the Leonids were not,
With clouds of many layers,
He among the forty players,
Pointed his OM-1*

*To a clearing in the sky – and clicked –
With a prayer – that a meteor would come there.
Again and again he opened the light capturing box
With hope to capture but one Tempel-Tuttle child.*

*Then at 4 a.m. came the rain
And all seemed done.
The gazers were on the run.
But just then Jupiter cried out,
"Try here, I hear one coming"
Once again the box was opened
And three of Leo's brightest fireflies
Thrilled our hearts and eyes
And my own heart whispered
"Maybe you did catch one."*

*Later, with hope but bleak
Slowly through slides he searched.
Blank, a star, blank and then Behold, a streak
Across the film – what joy.
A meteor did come into my box's vision
And I feel like a small boy,
Who has just captured a firefly in a bottle*

And loves it.

*Although my image is faint
I surely have no complaint
The Guam Leonid Expedition was glorious
With friends new and old it was indeed most joyous.
And to adopt and hold (if only an image) one
Tempel-Tuttle Child,
Was indeed to me an experience victorious?*

*So together with images of Paula and Tom
And other gazers as well as Guam
I have also an image (which is only fair or was it
only gift?)
To remind me that the Leonids of 01 in Guam
Were really there and so was I.*

Astronomy Links

Greg Brinser discovered a wonderful resource for us. There are many thousands of astronomy related sites on the web. An amateur astronomer in Virginia has spent several months assembling a free collection of exceptional sites. Whether you are a beginner or an advanced observer, Clark Thomas' "Astronomy Links" will provide information and inspiration. Here's where to find it:
<http://members.cox.net/clarkt7/astronomylinks>

Amateur Astronomer Survey

The Astronomical Society of the Pacific (ASP) <http://www.astrosociety.org/> is conducting a survey of amateur astronomers as part of an educational research project through the University of New Mexico. As a thank-you, four names will be drawn from the completed surveys, each to receive a \$100 gift certificate to shop from the Astronomical Society of the Pacific Catalog. If 15 or more of our members respond, ASP will send a copy of our club's responses, without names and any other identifiers. Even if you are not sure whether you are an amateur, they are requesting that you answer the survey as best as possible. This will allow ASP to give astronomy clubs better ideas about educating club members and the public. The survey site is open through September 30, 2003. At the November AU meeting, Pat McPartlin will have answers available to some of the survey questions. To take the survey, go to:

<http://fs8.formsite.com/astrosociety/AstroSurvey/index.html>



Monster Trucks on Mars

by Patrick L. Barry and Dr. Tony Phillips

We all know what Mars rovers look like now: Robotic platforms, bristling with scientific instruments, trundling along on small metallic wheels. Planetary rovers of the future, however, might look a little different—like miniature monster trucks! Enormous, inflatable tires can easily roll right over the rocks and rugged terrain of alien planets, just as they bound over old cars like as many speed bumps. That's the idea behind a novel concept for robotic planetary rovers known as the "big wheels inflatable rover." Unlike rovers similar to the Sojourner robot that explored the surface of Mars in 1997 that depend on instructions sent from Earth or complex programmed intelligence to steer through rough terrain, this rover has three beach ball-like tires roughly five feet across that make it a true off-road vehicle. "We sent this rover out to Death Valley, to a place called Mars Hill that has a general geological formation like Mars, and nothing could stop it," says Jack Jones, the mastermind of the inflatable rover concept at JPL. "It just kept going and going and going." Lots of current research is devoted to developing advanced robotic intelligence that allows rovers to detect rocks in their path and maneuver around them. The alternative to such on-the-spot intelligence is tedium: Ground controllers on Earth working out the maneuvers by hand and waiting an hour or more for the instructions to travel to the distant planet. A "big wheels" rover would need such computer intelligence to avoid very large boulders, but Jones asks, "Why worry about every little rock, pebble, and crack when you can just roll right over most of them?" Jones imagines a scenario where multiple inflatable-wheel rovers could be sent out to explore the Martian terrain—easily and quickly traversing the rugged terrain. Samples gathered by the rovers could be returned to a central, stationary laboratory module for detailed analysis. "The Martian surface is really very, very rough with a lot of rocks, and to be banging this laboratory equipment up and down over all of these rocks aboard the rovers doesn't make much sense," Jones says. "I suspect it might be better to leave it in a central location." At the moment it's all very speculative; NASA currently has no definite plans to send inflatable rovers to Mars. But who knows, one day monster truck-like vehicles could be zipping over Mars' rough, red surface. Kids can baffle their friends with a robot puzzle (including a "Big Wheels" rover) they make themselves at http://spaceplace.nasa.gov/robots/robot_puzzle.htm For adults, find out more about NASA's inflatable rover program at http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/adv_tech/rovers/summary.htm

For Sale

Meade Superwedge. Will fit with 8" 10" 12" Meade LX 200. Excellent shape. Has all bolts, wrenches, and compass dial. Asking \$270.00. Also have Meade non adjustable tripod for LX 10, 90 200. Asking \$60. Contact John Boyd, (805) 569-6041 or email: jkeesb@earthlink.net

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