



AU AstroNews

The Newsletter of the Astronomical Unit

May 2026

Sponsored by the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History



*All set up for solar viewing at the Palmer Observatory.
Photo: Tom Totton.*

OUTREACH SUMMARY

Since the last newsletter, certified AU volunteers Krissie Cook, Tim Crawford, Tessa Flanagan, Rachel Freed, Art Harris, David Larson, Pat & Chuck McPartlin, Janet & Martin Meza, Edgar Ocampo, Michael Robertson, Sohini Sengupta, Tom Totton, Chuck Watson, Tom Whittemore, Greg Wittmann, and Andre Yew showed cool stuff in the sky to **1549** people, helped by Dr. Jen Gee and Westmont students.

SBAU volunteers must have undergone the SBMNH background check, and conform with the SBMNH policies for dealing with the public, to participate in outreach activities. To get vetted, contact SBMNH Volunteer Manager Rebecca Coulter <rcoulter@sbnature2.org>. It's quick and painless.

OUTREACH EVENTS

Thanks to all who helped out at Kaleidoscope for the Girl Scouts! Too bad the weather chose to stomp on Astronomy Day. Here's the schedule so far for May, which is pretty quiet:

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 6:30 PM

Short planetarium show, followed by the monthly SBAU meeting at 7 PM in Fleischmann Auditorium at SBMNH. Our speaker will be the Mars Curiosity rover's Deputy Project Scientist Dr. Abigail Fraeman, describing how Curiosity is reshaping our understanding of the evolution of our planetary neighbor, and the fate of habitable environments on a world that was once Earth-like.

SATURDAY, MAY 9, SETUP 7:30 PM

Monthly Public Star Party at SBMNH, from 8:30 PM to 10 PM at Palmer Observatory.

SUNDAY, MAY 10, 4:30 PM

AU monthly planning meeting on Zoom. Watch your email for the link.

FRIDAY, MAY 15, SETUP 7 PM

Monthly Public Telescope Night at Westmont's Keck Observatory, next to the athletic fields.

TUESDAY, MAY 19, SETUP 7 PM

Telescope Tuesday in the plaza by the theater at Camino Real Marketplace.

SBAU MEMBER SUMMER POTLUCK

Friday June 12, 2026

At SBMNH Fleischmann Auditorium.

Starts at 5PM.

Bring some food to share and your own beverage.

Come join the fun!

SBAU CLOTHING FOR SALE

Pat McPartlin, Merch Manager

Merchmgr@sbaa.org

SBAU is getting out of the clothing business!

In the inventory, I have at very low prices:

[Short-sleeved tee-shirts](#)

—3 small and 5 extra-large, for \$10.00 each.

[Long-sleeved tee-shirts](#)

—4 small, 4 extra-large, and 1 at 2XL, for \$15 each.

[Hoodie sweatshirts \(pull-over\)](#)

—2 small, for \$25.00 each.

[SBAU caps \(one-size\) for \\$10.00 each.](#)

Clothing sizes are true; all are pre-shrunk. Contact me at Merchmgr@sbaa.org with any questions or requests.

Once these are sold, you'll need to go directly to the company that can order these: ID Works in Santa Barbara. Contact them via email at info@idworkssb.com or call them at 805-965-6001. However, you'll have to pay full price and sales tax, and the club will earn no funds — talk with them to have your favorite SBAU clothing set up for you!

TEN FEET TALL - SURFING THE WAVES OF OTHER WORLDS

Jerry Wilson

In 1969 the central coast around Santa Barbara experienced a major oil spill. I had just graduated from CalState Northridge with a masters in physics. My roommate, Marc and I hopped in my '67 Bug and drove up the coast to see what it looked like. The scene was indescribably depressing, and it smelled terribly. The ocean was oily black and the waves moved in sluggish slow motion. The thick layer of oil was obviously heavier and more viscous than sea water. It left an indelible memory.

Recently, I flashed back on this memory when I read about a study from MIT that described how waves on various solar system bodies might look if density, viscosity, and a gentle driving wind were present.

The computer model is called 'PlanetWaves' and is based on 20 years' worth of data collected by buoys on Lake Superior, which is Earth's largest freshwater lake, situated on the border between Canada and the United States. The model was able to replicate measurements of that lake precisely, giving the researchers confidence to apply it to other worlds. With this model, we can see how waves behave on planets with different liquids, atmospheres, and gravity compared to Earth normal, which can kind of challenge our intuition.

[Saturn](#)'s largest moon [Titan](#) was their primary focus, simply because it is the only other world that we know for sure has bodies of liquid on its surface, with its rivers, lakes, and seas being mapped by the [Cassini-Huygens](#) mission. However, Titan's liquid is not water, but rather oily hydrocarbons such as methane and ethane, which are gases on Earth but rendered liquid due to the exceedingly cold temperatures of -179 degrees Celsius (-290 degrees Fahrenheit).

The team found that a light wind could raise waves 10 feet high in Titan's lakes, thanks to its low gravity, which is 14% of Earth's, and the relatively light nature of the liquid, which makes it easier to move. The model was applied to a variety of other worlds that could support liquids of some kind, though so far none have been confirmed to actually have liquids.

Nevertheless, the [habitable zone](#) planet [LHS 1140b](#) has a density that suggests up to 19% of its mass is water in some form. As a super-Earth with stronger gravity than our planet, waves on any hypothetical ocean would be much smaller than on Earth for the same wind speed. More exotic is the exoplanet Kepler-1649b, which is a hot [Venus](#)-like world with similar gravity to Earth. Venus has copious amounts of sulfuric acid in its atmosphere, and Kepler-1649b might have too. If that sulfuric

acid can exist on the planet's surface, then it would require strong winds just to cause the acid lake to ripple because sulfuric acid is twice as dense as liquid water.

Findings were published on April 3rd in the [Journal of Geophysical Research: Planets](#). The paper's lead author is Una Schneck, a Ph.D. student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), with co-author Andrew Ashton of MIT and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.



Chuck Watson shows the sun to the public on a Sunday afternoon at the Palmer Observatory. Photo: Tom Totton.

AU Information Box
President: Jerry Wilson 252-2206
jerryawilsonphd@gmail.com
Vice President: Ronnie Herron
vicepresident@sbau.org
Secretary: Mike Lawson
sbau.secretary@gmail.com
Treasurer: Pat McPartlin 964-8201
treasurer@sbau.org
Equipment: Tom Totton 562-8795
equipment@sbau.org
Outreach: Chuck McPartlin 964-8201
outreach@sbau.org
Newsletter: Tom Whitemore 687-2025
kometes@aol.com
Webmaster: Tom Totton 562-8795
webmaster@sbau.org
Events: Diane Welcenbach
Events@SBAU.org
Merch Manager: Pat McPartlin 964-8201
Merchmgr@sbau.org
SBMNH Astronomy Programs Manager
Ila Jade Komasa 682-4711x164
ijadekomasa@sbnature2.org

AU AstroNews, the monthly publication of the **Astronomical Unit (AU)**, is mailed to the AU membership. For publishing consideration for the next month, submit astronomical items by the 20th of the current month!

AU annual membership rate: \$20

AU mailing address:

Astronomical Unit
c/o Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History
2559 Puesta Del Sol Road
Santa Barbara, CA 93105

On the Web: <http://www.sbau.org/>

The Astronomical Unit

c/o Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History
2559 Puesta Del Sol Road
Santa Barbara, CA 93105

MAY 2026						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1 GENERAL MEETING 6:30PM	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9 SBMNH STAR PARTY SETUP 7:30PM
10 PLANNING MEETING ON ZOOM 4:30PM	11	12	13	14	15 WESTMONT 7PM	16
17	18	19 CAMINO REAL MARKETPLACE 7PM	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						