



The American Astronomer

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF
THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF AMATEUR ASTRONOMERS

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Sky & Telescope Senior Editor Lief Robinson (center) and Mars expert Don Parker (left) discuss Astronomical League business with Chuck Colson during Alcon 97 in Colorado. Lief Robinson was instrumental in helping set up the new "Skyline" and "Sky at a Glance" e-mail service sponsored by the AAAA.

AAAA Inks Deal With *Sky & Telescope* Magazine

Because of all the great news affecting your society, the American Association of Amateur Astronomers, for this month, the President's Notes will be on the front page of this issue.

Our first big news is that the AAAA and *Sky & Telescope* Magazine have agreed to offer *S&T's* weekly astronomy news bulletins, "Skyline", and "Sky at a Glance", to the amateur astronomy community as a free service via the Internet. The AAAA will provide the listserv for this new service at no charge to *S&T* magazine and the amateur community, and will maintain and administer the list of recipients. This is yet another public service that your society provides.

If you have Internet e-mail, and would like to receive these publications by e-mail, then send an e-mail message to "skyline@gs1.revnet.com", and put the word "join" on the first line of the body of the message. Once this is done, you will receive a welcome letter from *S&T* publisher Rick Fienberg, and the latest issue of "Skyline", and "Sky at a Glance", delivered right to your doorstep. Stay tuned for more free services that your society plans to offer to the amateur astronomy community, and in which you can participate.

Your fellow AAAA members continue to make giant strides toward completing their

favorite observing programs. This month, I am happy to congratulate Brenda Culbertson for receiving both the Astronomical League's Binocular Messier Club Certificate, and the full 110 object telescopic Messier Certificate, and P.J. Mitchell for earning the Astronomical League's Lunar Club Certificate. Nice job, guys, and we are all really proud of you. Just as a side note to all of this, since we have observing programs for every taste, there is no reason why you can't get your own certificate as well.

I have been working on a new Astronomical League observing program designed to bring amateur astronomy back to the cities. It is called the Urban Club, and consists of 100 deep sky objects that can be seen from a heavily light polluted area. I am happy to announce that at the Astronomical League National Convention in Colorado this past July, the program was approved by the A.L. Council, and will be implemented fully. This means that not only will we have flyers and certificates for the club, but will have nice lapel pins as well. This is yet another contribution to amateur astronomy by your society, the AAAA. This new observing program will be announced in the November issue of the Astronomical League's Reflector.

One of your fellow AAAA members, Brenda Culbertson, had an opportunity to

P.J. Mitchell

Earns Lunar Certificate

This must be the month for observing. Congratulations go to P.J. Mitchell of Oxford, Al. for earning the Astronomical League's Lunar Club Certificate. P.J. observed 100 features on the moon using his naked eye, 10x50 binoculars, and a 60MM refractor telescope. Nice job, P.J. We're really glad you are a member of the AAAA.

Brenda Culbertson

Earns Two Certificates

A hearty congratulations to AAAA member Brenda Culbertson of Topeka, Ks. for earning both the Binocular Messier Certificate and the telescopic Messier Certificate offered by the Astronomical League. Brenda used 7x35 and 10x50 binoculars, and an eight inch S/C telescope in earning these two awards. Brenda receives the honorary Messier Certificate since she observed all 110 Messier objects in the program. Way to go, Brenda!!!!

attend this year's Nebraska Star Party, and was kind enough to write an article on her trip and share it with us. Thank you, Brenda, for a wonderful article. Also, Brenda has sent us some observing programs that she has been working on, so be sure to be on the lookout for a special bulletin next month on Deep Sky Binocular Observing, and Lunar Observing, both by AAAA member Brenda Culbertson.

Well, as you can see, we have all been quite busy around here. And it will get busier yet. I have a new club after the Urban Club that I need to work on, and it promises to help promote amateur astronomy in the community at large. I'll give you more details later on. In the meantime, if you have anything you would like to share with your fellow AAAA members, be sure to send it to us, via e-mail or snail mail, and we'll be glad to publish it. Until next time, clear skies and bloodshot eyes.

John Wagoner
AAAA President.



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All members are encouraged to submit articles and photographs for publication. Send all materials for publication to the Editor at the address below.

The opinions expressed by contributors to the AMERICAN ASTRONOMER do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the AAAA or the Editor. Articles representing supporting or opposing views will be published promptly after receipt.

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A Member
Society of
The
Astronomical
League

Letter to the Editor

Dear Sirs:

I recently joined the AAAA in December of 1996. I wondered why I have only received one (1) *Reflector* Magazine and only two (2) AAAA Newsletters? I would also like a list of the 210 Astronomical Clubs. I would like to know if I would be able to attend the meetings of these 210 clubs nationwide. Also, do the members of the AAAA get club cards? I also need to know if the discount on *Astronomy* Magazine is for first time buyers only? Thank you.

Jared Lutkowski
Moosic, Pa.
08-07-97

Dear Jared:

Thank you for letting us share your letter with the rest of the AAAA membership, as I am sure that many of them have the same questions that you do. This will give us an opportunity to answer them for everyone. So here goes:

I'm sorry that you are not getting some of the materials that we have been sending you. We try to send out something each and every month. I sincerely hope that you are getting good postal service in your area. I have checked your address with both the AAAA and the A.L., and it seems to be OK.

The *Reflector* is printed quarterly, and comes out in February, May, August, and November. Our records show that you joined the AAAA on February 4, 1997, and since the *Reflector* is mailed on the first, you would not have gotten that issue. It appears that you did get the May issue, and the August issue just got

mailed out, so you will probably receive it at the same time that you receive this letter. Just because you joined in February, doesn't mean that you will miss out on any *Reflectors*. You will get the November, 1997, and February, 1998 issues which will fulfill your subscription.

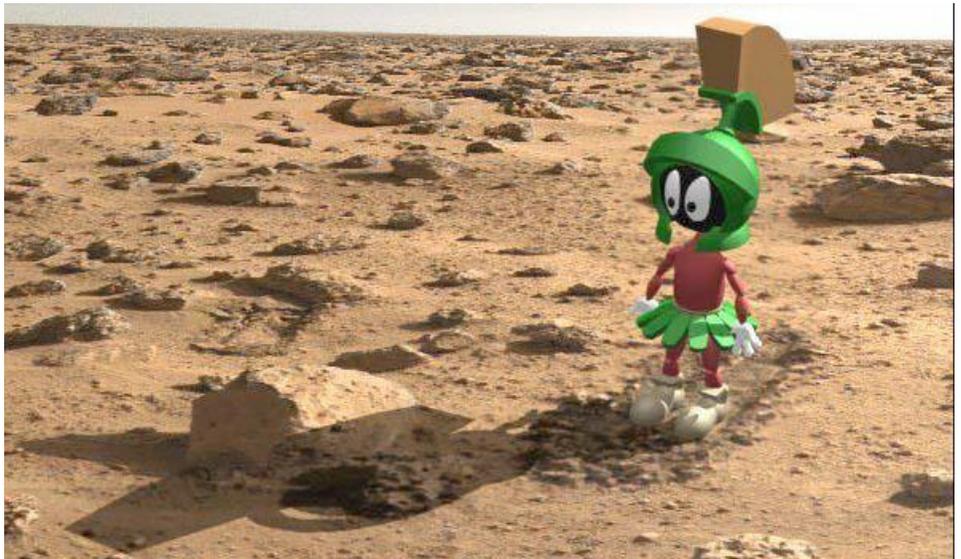
The AAAA Newsletter is also printed Quarterly, and comes out in December, March, June, and September. If you have received two issues, then it sounds like you are current, but we also like to include a fifth issue, the last issue published, when you join. You might check your membership materials for that issue. If you are indeed missing an issue, please let me know and I'll be glad to send it to you.

The list of clubs in the Astronomical League is printed in the November issue of the *Reflector*. If you need a list sooner, then write to Janet Stevens, A.L. Executive Secretary, for the current list. Her address is in your *Reflector*. Each club in the League is an independent organization, but all welcome visitors, and you should be able to attend any of their meetings. Contact the club's ALCOR for details on when and where they meet.

We don't have an AAAA membership card as yet, but maybe that would be a good idea. We are working on getting a nice embroidered patch for those members that renew, but maybe we should consider a membership card. Consider that idea stolen. :-)

And finally, the *Astronomy* Magazine discounts can be used for new subscriptions or renewals.

John Wagoner
AAAA President



Air Force Says Reported Spacecraft Was Weather Balloon

CYDONIA MENSAE (AP) -- Spokesmen for the Official Martian Air Force (OMAF) said today that rumors of a crashed alien spacecraft said to have come down in the Ares Vallis desert were entirely false and had been grossly exaggerated by the Martian news media.

Astronomers interviewed by the *New Cydonia Times* scoffed at the notion that extramartian visitors would land in one of the least interesting regions of Mars. "Why wouldn't they land near something obviously important, like the Great Stone Head, instead of in the middle of a vast desert?" one asked. "No form of advanced intelligence would land where there's nothing of interest to observe but rocks."

Alien-contact enthusiasts were unperturbed by such rational arguments, however, contending the evidence must have been taken into custody by military personnel. Rumors and conspiracy theories were running rampant. One wild-eyed witness actually claimed he saw a tiny alien space car driving slowly across the desert.

The New Cydonia Times * July 6, 1997

The Great Nebraska Star Party

by Brenda Culbertson - American Association of Amateur Astronomers

The fourth annual Nebraska Star Party (NSP4) was held August 2 - 9, 1997 in the Sandhills, midway across the state near the Nebraska - South Dakota border. Each year the star party grows in numbers of attendees and this year was no exception. Over 320 individuals registered for the week long gathering of astronomers of all levels of experience and interest and from all areas of the world. An estimate of 200 telescopes and other various observing instruments were situated in the observing field.

NSP is hosted by the Prairie Astronomy Club of Lincoln, Nebraska and the Omaha Astronomical Society of Omaha, Nebraska. These two groups begin organization of each star party a year ahead to make sure all that can be done is done to provide activities, facilities, and as many clear nights as humanly possible. This year many activities were organized for families as well as individuals. These activities included a beach party with contests, bar-b-que, and socialization. Trips down the Niobrara River, public viewings, school visits, and many other interesting and fun events were provided.

The observing field was in a camp area of Merritt State Lake which is a beautiful lake with sand beaches. The State Lake officials shield the lights (both old and new) so that there is as dark an area for participants as possible. The Merritt Resort also provided special deals for NSP participants. These included the use of the resort area for activities, shower facilities for a minimal price, and friendly faces and coffee after a long night of observing.

This year the activities were fun and exciting; the facilities were more than adequate, but the clear skies were not as well attended to as should have been. Four "Clear Sky Coordinators" were gone through before the star party ended. The traditional "perfect" skies were plagued with wind, clouds, and high humidity, sometimes all at the same time. We were treated to a light-

ing storm one night which was followed by some wishy-washy weather. Most of the weather was washy from high humidity, which made the participants wishy that things would dry up. We did get a couple of clear nights in which to observe, but each night of the week everyone was prepared, nonetheless.

Presentations were made on August 8th at the Valentine high school. Mike Ford set up the Star Lab in the lobby and gave showings throughout the day. Brenda Culbertson gave a program on "Binocular Activities for Amateur Astronomers" that afternoon, and Richard Wilds told all about the HART group, their equipment and their research projects. Programs were given by Vic Winter - Southern Skies Star Party, and several other individuals.

Vendors brought equipment, accessories, and miscellaneous items for sale and display. Door prizes which were donated by many companies and individuals were given out all week during activities and programs. Catered meals were brought in for those who were tired of eating camp food or driving the long trip into Valentine. NSP staff were readily available to help alleviate any problems that came up, and to keep things exciting.

Everyone involved with NSP should be congratulated for a job well done and for an ongoing enthusiasm for the hobby (?) of astronomy.

NSP5 (August 18 - 25, 1998) will again be at Merritt Reservoir in the State Park. It be a week of dark skies and astronomical fellowship. There will be again many activities, talks, and programs for people of all levels of astronomical interest. During NSP5 there will also be a Beginning Observers Field School, designed to help those just getting started in the hobby of astronomy some of the "do's" and "don'ts". It will also guide the beginner on his way through equipment, observing, and a few intermediate skills.

For more information on past and future Nebraska Star Parties, check out the NSP home page at: <http://www.4w.com/nsp/>

Lunar Occultation of Saturn

by Brenda Culbertson

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Isn't it amazing the things we get up at odd hours to see and do?

The lunar occultation of Saturn on Thursday, September 18th was one of the most spectacular astronomical events I had seen in a very long time. Before the occultation began at approximately 5:45 a.m. I went out for a quick look. The sight was not just nice, but fantastic!

Saturn was hovering just off the bright side limb of the Moon, with one of its pole ends positioned to disappear first. The rings would go in at the mid-point of the disappearance and then the other pole. But, it just hovered there for a few minutes as I watched.

After I pried myself away from the eyepiece, I began focusing on recording the event on video. I set the camera on the tripod and let it run while I got the scope ready. After the scope was ready, I began recording the disappearance, using the afocal method with a Hi 8 camcorder, an 8 inch reflector, and a 25 mm eyepiece. It worked pretty well although I was hoping for a prime focus system for a steady recording.

Saturn was faint against the bright limb of the Moon, but the video recorded it well. My hand-held video camera method was somewhat shaky considering the wind, the magnification, and other Murphyisms. I managed to keep Saturn in the frame and recorded its disappearance. Then I had about 45 minutes before the reappearance, so I went in and had breakfast.

Since I did not trust my skills at foretelling the future, and I did not know the exact point, only the area, of the reappearance of Saturn from the dark sliver of the Moon, I used a wide angle shot at first. I kept the area I believed Saturn would show itself in the shot and when I could see the beginning of the reappearance, I zoomed in on it.

The reappearance began with a "pointed light" that resembled an illuminated mountain peak. But, this peak was much brighter than all the others and was farther away from the rest. I zoomed in on it and it began to grow. The rings were coming out first! I said a few "Oh, WOW's" and kept shooting. The rings, then the planetary disk, then the rest of the ring system. Since the reappearance was from the dark limb, there was more contrast in brightness and Saturn appeared much brighter than during the disappearance.

After the reappearance and a moderate separation between Saturn and the Moon was seen, I set the camera back on the tripod and let it run for a while longer. The sight was beautiful!

Later that morning I took the tape in to school and talked with one of my previous instructors. She was so interested in the tape that she helped me dub it instead of just letting me into the editing bay. After we viewed the tape she asked if I would let one of her classes use the edited version and an interview with me for the "Washburn Edition", the cable channel Washburn University students produce. I was happy to comply with her request since my goal was to share the view of the event anyway.

Sky and Telescope Magazine

Did you know that you can subscribe to *Sky and Telescope* magazine at a discount through the AAAA? A regular subscription to *S&T* is \$36.00 per year, but you can get it through the AAAA for only \$27.00 per year. If you would like to start a subscription to *S&T* through the AAAA, or if you want to extend your present subscription at the reduced rates, then send a check for \$27.00 made payable to the AAAA to:

AAAA - 3131 Custer Rd. Suite 175-175 - Plano, Tx. 75075

M31 - The Great Galaxy in Andromeda

M-31, the Great Galaxy in Andromeda, and its companions M32 and M110, is truly one of the show-pieces of the northern sky. M-31 is the closest large spiral galaxy to our own Milky Way galaxy, and therefore presents us with a wealth of details. Numerous dust lanes are evident, and large telescopes can even identify individual members of its system of globular clusters.

As our nearest spiral neighbor in space, M31 extends over 3 degrees, and is easily visible to the naked eye. Its two companions, M32 to the south, and M110 to the north, are both small elliptical galaxies.

M31 itself is best seen at low powers, and one of the best views I've had was through 16x80 binoculars. At this



magnification, the complete extent of the main galaxy can be seen, and the fuzzy, star-like M32 and the elliptical M110 can be glimpsed quite easily in the same field of view. Marvelous! *Text by Rick Raasch. Photo by Tim Leslie.*

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