

## **Black Forest Star Party 2009**

I always look forward to the Black Forest Starparty. The Fall season is such a beautiful time of year to be out in the forests and the night sky is probably at its best, with the Milky-Way flowing overhead from the NE to SW horizons. All of the bright Spring, Summer, and early Fall deep-sky objects are available for observing. The day and evening temperatures are usually moderate, and most of the annoying bugs are gone.

### **9/15/2009 (day-1) Tuesday**

Arrived at Cherry Springs around 3:30 PM from Pittsburgh. I'm now familiar with all phases of 'tar and chip' road repair! ;) Bob K and Denny H were already here in our usual spot.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-02.jpg>

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(Mike from NJ and Dennis also were there, Nick showed up later).

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-04.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-05.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-06.jpg>

There's probably a good 50 - 60 attendees already on site, with more rolling in later in the evening. For the drive up, it was mostly cloudy, but started to break late in the afternoon.

We had scatter clouds at sunset, so Denny and I hurried up and finished setting up our telescopes and polar aligned. Bob decided not to get his out. There was a light breeze, which help kept the dew and mosquitoes away.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-07.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-08.jpg>

At around 9:30 PM, the clouds started building again. Spent the next several hours chasing deep-sky objects through the sucker holes.

(it was nice viewing thru the holes). Was able to check off a few more Messier objects on my video capture list - M101, M32, M33, and M69.

Besides the objects that I captured, I also spent some time video-observing M22, which spectacularly filled the monitor, and M17.

It was really cool to have a high-res image of the Swan through my 8" SCT on one monitor with the Stellacam II, while having a wide-field image on the other monitor using my old Stellacam EX camera.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-31.jpg>

Finally, got tired of chasing around the sucker holes, so I started covering up the equipment a little after midnight. At that point, the clouds had started to thicken, and we were completely socked in by 12:30 AM. I was in bed by 1:00 AM.

## 9/16/2009 (day-2) Wednesday

Woke to a cold sunny morning. In talking with Denny, he had gotten up at 6:00 AM and it was beautifully clear, with Venus and a slim Crescent Moon rising in the East. Spent the morning sitting around the camp talking with Denny and Bob. Some folks a few camps down from us were doing daylight observing of Venus and Mars. I reviewed the images I had taken the night before and made plans for my observing session that night. Later that afternoon, we took a hike around the old airport and checked out the 'amphitheater' area where the park does its informal night sky public presentations. Also walked over to the old campground area - nice. The airport area across the road actually has better horizons than the official astronomy field. With the weather looking good for the evening, Denny and I spent the afternoon tuning up our telescopes. I decided to experiment and switched my video cameras around. I attached the older Stellacam EX to the 8" SCT at prime focus, and mounted the newer Stellacam II piggybacked on the SCT with a wide-field CCTV lens. That evening, before sunset, the three of us went for a stroll around the observing field. There were a number of large dobs, and a collection of other nice telescopes.

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<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-11.jpg>

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<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-19.jpg>

The sky remained mostly sunny all day, so Bob finally decided to set up his telescope. At sunset, the few remaining clouds cleared, and we all got busy with our observing programs. I spent a good deal of time using the SC-II and wide-field lens to image the Milky-Way.

Here's an attempt at a mosaic:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-29.jpg>

I captured an interesting visual effect from one of our camping neighbors a few campsites down. They had a tiny redlight on inside their tent. It looked like the 'mother-ship' had landed!!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-30.jpg>

As the evening progressed, the temperature dropped into the upper 40's, and the dew became heavy. After finishing up with the SC-II, I started my main video capture observing program with a nice globular cluster, NGC6934 in Delphinus. It was surprisingly bright. I then moved on to M73, a little asterism of four stars in Aquarius, and M74, galaxy in Pisces. That's as far as I got, as bands of clouds began moving in around 10:00 PM. I spent the remaining time jumping around to the brighter showcase objects, such as M17, the Ring Nebula, M11, the Wild Duck Cluster, and globulars M2, and M15. By 11:00 PM, the clouds had won the battle, and most folks packed it in for the evening. I stuck it out till 11:30 PM, but called it quits and was in bed by midnight.

### 9/17/2009 (day-3) Thursday

Slept in till about 8:00 AM. After climbing out of my teardrop camper, I discovered it had rained. It stayed cloudy, damp, and cold all morning. But, the weather forecast was promising for later that evening, and on into Friday and Saturday. After breakfast, we just hung out around camp. I ended up going back inside my camper, turning on the heater, and reading a new book that I have, "Deep Sky Video Astronomy". After a late lunch, I headed down to the shower house. Coming back to the campground, it still looked like it could rain at any moment. The partial clearing that was forecast earlier wasn't happening! Still, with the bad weather, a good number of campers had shown up while I was out, and the open space around our campsite was starting to fill up. More attendees kept pulling in throughout the afternoon, to be greeted by a rain shower around 4:30 PM. The clouds that had slowly begun lifting settled back down into an overcast gloom. It didn't look good for that night. All afternoon, the clouds continued to thicken, along with light rain and fog. As the air temp dropped into the upper 40's, we called it an early night and retired to our individual camps. I read a little, and watched a movie before bed.

### 9/18/2009 (day-4) Friday

I awoke to bright sunlight filtering thru my camper windows. The heavy clouds were gone, with just a little patchy fog left over. As the morning progressed, the fog burned off, and the observing field began to dry out. The vendors began arriving and setting up, so the three of us went over and checked out the goods. By noon, people began pouring in, jamming camps in everywhere!! I asked one of the BFSP workers from the Central Pennsylvania Observers, and he told me that there was over 529 registered attendees, and that did not include any of their club members. The weather continued to improve, with the temperature warming up into the upper 60's. After lunch, I broke out the solar filters for a couple of hours, but with the ongoing current solar minimum, there was little 'action' to observe, even with the Cak or Ha Daystar. The observing session was rudely ended by a bank of clouds that rolled thru and obscured most of the sky!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-20.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-21.jpg>

After I had packed up the filters, we walked over to Mays for dinner. While there we met a nice couple from Bethel Park on their first trip to Cherry Springs, and ran in to Fred K.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-27.jpg>

Later that evening Maureen and Bill M dropped over at our camp to visit. After dinner, we took another stroll around the observing field, and we were all greatly impressed by the number of large 24" > dobs present. We all agreed that this was the biggest crowd that we'd ever seen at Cherry Springs for any starparty! It was so packed that you could hardly cut through between roads. All four of the on-site observatories were full, with people camping in between them. (they were even pitching tents close to the portajohns).

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-22.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-23.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-24.jpg>

During our walk about the observing field, the sky had mostly cleared again, so we hurried back to our campsite and uncovered our telescopes for the night's observing. While it started out clear, it became dewy right away. The atmosphere was clearly unstable, with the air temperature plummeting, and clouds were literally forming right over us, and within a few minutes would dissipate. This kept up and hindered our observing until about 11:00 pm, when the air finally stabilized. We made the most of it by staying up observing till 3:00. Bob and Denny were imaging all kinds of objects, such as the Bubble, Crescent, Helix, Blue Snowball, and Cats Eye Nebula, along with the Sculptor Galaxy - NGC253, while I would attempt to real-time observe them with my SC-II video astronomy setup.

I also knocked off another Messier object on my list, M77. Would have done more, but polar alignment issues from earlier in the week slowed me down. It wasn't one of the best nights, as the transparency was bad, but it still beat anything back home, and we made the most of it!

### **9/19/2009 (day-5) Saturday**

Woke up late Saturday morning. In talking with my neighbors who were up sooner, a number of them had seen frost!! There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and with the rising temperature, what dew remained quickly dried. After seeing Denny and Bob return with goodies from the vendors, I hurried down to see the new vendors who had opened shop that morning. I picked up a 'bahtinov' focusing mask for my 8" SCT. Celestron was also there giving out free hats.

Had a quick lunch and then completed my preparations for the talk on Video Astronomy that I was giving at 1:15 PM. My presentation was well attended, with lots of questions afterwards, both inside the pavilion, and outside on the way back to camp.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-25.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-26.jpg>

That evening a number of the attendees stopped by for the video observing session. I think there are a few more amateurs who will be going 'video astronomy' real soon! ;)

The skies continued to be crystal clear all day, with the temp reaching mid-seventies. Throughout the day, more attendees continued to arrive. At this point, campsites stretched almost all the way to the fence in the lower southern portion of the observing field. People were setting up on the narrow strip of grass between the permanent restroom facility and where Mays had their dining tent. Two separate scout groups were camped in the north field behind the vendor's tent, along with a couple of large RV's parked to the west. Even the public campgrounds across the road had at least a dozen camps with telescopes sitting about. Almost every last bit of available space was taken!

Later that evening, a large number of public showed up for the open observing session. I'd estimate that there were probably at least 750 attendees on site Saturday night!!

The three of us decided to skip the start of the keynote speaker and instead take in May's Spaghetti Dinner!! Before we went, I spent a little time reattaching my video equipment and accessories in advance of the evening. (which I'm glad I did). After finishing our dinner, we headed over to the keynote presentation. There was such a large crowd, that we ended up sitting on a picnic table on the hillside above the pavilion. Denny decided to head back to camp and process some of his images from the night before. He came running back when he heard the applause at the end of the presentation.

Then came the Door Prizes!!! And the Black Forest organizers had a very nice selection this year!!

Once again Kiski club members struck gold.

Bob K won a motorized camera mount. And, I got lucky and won the second place prize - an 80mm f6.3 Bosma Refractor!!

It came with eyepieces, finder, and a field tripod.

About an hour later it had first light!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-32.jpg>

The drawing ended well after sunset, so we rushed back to our camps and quickly changed into cold weather clothes. (you could feel the temp rapidly dropping as soon as the sun had set). In a short time, the first stars of the evening began to shine, and we had our telescopes in operation.

As I mentioned before, it was a good thing that I had taken the time earlier to setup my video equipment prior to going to dinner.

Shortly after I had finished turning on the equipment and getting everything focused, I began to have crowds of public attendees stop in. (I had volunteered to participate in the open house observing for that evening, and the BFSP organizers had given me red and green glowsticks to mark my location).

For the next three hours, I had groups of people lining up outside my tent for a look at what was on the video monitors inside. There were even several groups who after an initial view stopped back a couple of hours later on their way out. I stuck to all the major showcase deep-sky objects, such as M17, M22, and M57. For a group of more advanced amateurs, I slewed the telescope over to M16, the Eagle Nebula, where they could see real-time the Hubble 'Pillars of Creation'.

They were quite impressed!!

It was a very good public video astronomy session.

An interesting atmospheric event happened around 7:45 PM. A number of the public attendees started asking me about what looked like some bright light or explosion over in the southeastern sky. I was under my tent canopy adjusting the video monitors, so I didn't see it happen. But after being questioned, I came out and looked over in that direction. Visible just to the east of Jupiter was a luminous diffuse looking cloud that was quickly fading away. Some of the people around me said that it came from the bright flash that they had seen the previous minute. Back home the next day, I learned that the cloud was created by a NASA sounding rocket launched from Wallops Flight Facility in Virginia. The rocket released a cloud of gas near the top of Earth's atmosphere to investigate the formation of noctilucent clouds or "NLCs". Apparently, it was visible all along the Eastern seaboard. Neat-O!!!

Once the crowd had died down, Bob and Denny finished their imaging, and Bob packed away his equipment. Then I put the 8" SCT on M27, the Dumb Bell Nebula, and left the tent flap open for anyone to drop by as we went for a stroll around the observing, in search of one of the 30" dobs that was on the field. We also wanted to visit a campsite area that we had seen the day before which we had named the 'Valley of the Dobs' because there must have been 8 - 10 dobs, 17" - 24" . We found one of the 30" Dobs, (it belonged to Tom W from the Erie Mobile Group), and had several great views of the Cats Eye Nebula, and NGC253, which was nice, as we could compare the view to what we remembered from our imaging session the nite before. As Tom W had a crowd wanting to look thru his monster, we continued our walk, stopping at a large refractor for a view of Jupiter. We also paused at a few other 25" dobs that we encountered, but we never could find that group of big dobs. We were getting cold and a little tired, so we headed back to our camp.

After we got back from our walk, Bob went straight to bed, while Denny finished off his imaging session with a few dark frames, and I packed up my video cameras and closed down the telescope for the night. By now, the air temp had dropped into the low 30's. Apparently I didn't have my dew heaters set high enough while we were out walking about the field, as my finder had frosted over!!

I ended the evening around 1:30 AM, spending some time in a chair just viewing the brighter portions of the Aquila / Cygnus Milky -Way setting in the west, and watching for the occasional bright meteor.

### 9/20/2009 (day-6) Sunday

I had planned on sleeping in late, but the noise of people packing woke me up. Bob had already left for home, and Denny was up and about, putting away his telescope. After I quick breakfast, I began to break down my camp, and hit the road home by 11:00.

Had a nice drive thru the forest, no road work today, and enjoyed the scenic forest views of the trees that were starting to change to their fall colors. Arrived home and unpacked in time for the late afternoon Steelers game!!

A great close to another season of starparties at Cherry Springs !!!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/BF2009-28.jpg>

Larry McHenry