

## **Manitoulin Island Star Party 2009**

Hi all,

Back in the spring of 2008, fellow Kiski Astronomer Terry Trees heard about a starparty in upper Ontario, Canada, located at a new Dark-Sky preserve of Gordon's Park Campground on Manitoulin Island located in Northern Lake Huron. So he and his better half, JoAnne, attended and had a great time. Terry reported back that the skies were nearly as good as West Texas! Over the winter, Terry convinced me to make the trip with him this year. As a bonus, the Manitoulin Starparty was back-to-back with the nearby Starfest convention, Canada's largest. So we could make one drive, up and back, and take in both starparties over a 10 day stretch.

### **08-14-2009 (Day-1) Friday.**

So the day arrived to begin the long journey north. Using Google Maps and consulting with the local AAA branch, I figured it would be about a 10 hour drive to the little town of Tobermory at the tip of Bruce Peninsula, where I had to catch the car ferry over to Manitoulin Island. But, I had to catch the 3:40 PM ferry departure, or I would have to wait till the much later 8:00 PM crossing, and that would put me in well past 10:00 PM at the island campground. Having packed and hitched the trailer the night before, I got up early and was on the road by 5:15 AM. I made good driving time from Pittsburgh to Erie on I79 and on toward Buffalo on I90. But, right outside of Buffalo, there was a huge wreck on the highway that had both sides of the interstate closed for a good 40 minutes. Eventually, the traffic was able to move, and I made it to Buffalo and over the Peace Bridge into Canada, where I picked up the QEW expressway and headed toward Hamilton. Past Hamilton, I took Rt6 heading north. There was a lot of heavy truck traffic that slowed down my progress. I was beginning to be really behind on my driving schedule. There would be no time for a lunch stop, so I pulled out some snacks from my camping supplies to keep me going. I made a wrong turn in the little town of Fergus, got caught in their 'lunch rush hour' and lost more time. North of Mount Forest, I began hitting patches of road construction, slowing down my progress, again. Finally, I made it thru central Ontario to the base of Bruce Peninsula, and headed toward Tobermory. At that point, being around 2:00 PM, I decided to call the ferry dock and see if I could get a reservation. Getting through to their scheduling desk, I got some bad news that added to my road stress, the ferry was so busy; they had stopped taking reservations for the day! If I could get there soon, they 'might' be able to squeeze me onboard. So I put the pedal to the metal, and drove like a bat out of hell!! (good thing my little teardrop is very lightweight, as I was flooring it to pass slower traffic). Amazingly, the projected arrival time on my GPS unit began dropping. ;) I made it to the dock in only an hour, and was able to catch the 3:40 PM departure. I was lucky that I didn't get a ticket!!

Once onboard, I grabbed a late lunch and enjoyed the two hour lake crossing. Here are a few pictures:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-01.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-02.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-03.jpg>

Once on the island, I stopped for gas in the little town of South Baymouth, and after about 15 minutes further on the road, arrived at Gordon's Park and the Manitoulin Island Starparty convention.

Here's a pic of their residence/bed-n-breakfast and the park office:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-04.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-05.jpg>

Inside the office, there was a nice astronomy display, and nearly every inch of wall space was taken up by displays of local flora and fauna and fossils:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-06.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-07.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-08.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-09.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-10.jpg>

Here's a shot of the little barn where you could charge your battery:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-11.jpg>

And this is the main shower house/ privy:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-12.jpg>

There was an outdoor sink to wash dishes:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-13.jpg>

And the showers were interesting. You filled up a rubber bag with water to the temperature of your liking, then hung it on a hook in one of the two shower stalls, and then hoisted it up over your head!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-14.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-15.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-16.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-17.jpg>

Once I had checked in/registered at the main office, I drove over to the dark-sky preserve camping area and met up with Terry, who helped me setup camp and introduced me to the other attendees. (there was Christina, Glen & Rolo. John. Deitter & Cindy. Ken & Darrel. Jeff. Teri & Trevor. Leo & Victoria, Liz & Mai, and Steve & family). Terry and I estimated that the overall attendance for the event was around 60.

As it was getting late, I hurried up and setup my 8" Meade LX200GPS, aligned the tripod, assembled the telescope & accessories. Once it was dark enough to see Polaris, I went thru the iterative polar alignment process and achieved a precise alignment for the evening and the rest of the convention.

I then unpacked the deep-sky cameras, (Stellacam Ex and Stellacam II), and installed them on the telescope, powered up the monitors & computer, focused the cameras, and readied for an imaging session.

All day, and late into the afternoon, there were lots of scattered cirrus clouds and contrails that lingered into the evening. While the sky was quite dark, and the Milky-Way was very nice, I'd have to say that there have been better nights at Cherry Springs. (Terry tells me that Thursday night was much better). Still, the island's dark sky was very enjoyable. Except for the swarming mosquitoes, who seemed to relish Deep Woods Off as a sauce!! The mosquitoes loved to gather inside my tent canopy, and were very attracted to the glow from the monitors.

Every morning when preparing breakfast, I would open up the teardrop camper's tailgate, and be greeted by a flock of hungry mosquitoes, looking for their breakfast, and I was on the menu!

Being tired from the long drive, I decided not to begin my observing program that night, but instead enjoyed the nice dark skies and spent time demonstrating video astronomy to the other attendees. (apparently no one else there had ever seen one of the deep-sky integrating video cameras in use). All night long, I had a steady stream of visitors amazed at the images I was pulling up on the monitors. I had the Stellacam II at f6.3 prime focus on the 8", and the older Stellacam EX was mounted piggy back on the 8" with a wide-field 24mm CCTV lens. Since the crowd was new to videoastronomy, I stuck with the usual showcase objects, the great globulars in Hercules - M13, and Sagittarius - M22, M17 - the Swan Nebula, M57 - the Ring Nebula, along with M11 - the Wild Geese Cluster. Finally, after around 1:00 AM, the lines of visitors at the monitors died down and the long day began catching up to me, so I called it a night and went to bed at 1:30 AM.

### **08-15-2009 (Day-2) Saturday.**

I awoke at dawn to the sound of raindrops!! A nice little shower had gone thru. I went back to sleep for a few more hours to finally awake to a partly cloudy sky. At times, it became completely overcast and sprinkled. The Sun eventually came out later in the afternoon, and began drying things out. The observing field is quite primitive. There are a few gravel roads looping around the large somewhat uneven rocky field. Here's a few observing field pictures:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-23.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-24.jpg>

There is no electricity or water nearby, and the restrooms consisted of a few wooden 'privies' or outhouses. Here's a picture of my camper and Terry, JoAnne, and myself. (Joanne arrived on Sunday Afternoon):

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-22.jpg>

There was a nice shelter building and a dinning tent setup beside it. This is where Terry and I gave our presentations.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-18.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-19.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-20.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-21.jpg>

My talk on stargazing and folklore went well, with lots of good follow-up questions. Later Terry presented his 'Who Murdered Tyco Brahe' talk that was also well received. Prior to Terry's talk, the camp owners, (Rita & Terry Gordon), had a special presentation on becoming Canada's first commercial dark-sky preserve. There was a pot luck dinner, ribbon cutting, and cake!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-25.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-26.jpg>

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<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-28.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-29.jpg>

Terry's talk on Tyco ended at sunset, and leaving the shelter building, it was obvious that it was going to be a real foggy nite! After dark, the sky was clear overhead, but the horizon was lost in a hazy soup up to a good 20 degrees. Scorpius and the Teapot disappeared into the steamy nite. The Milky-Way overhead in Cygnus took on a more diffuse glow. I tried to image a few objects on my observing list, but gave up after only the first one - M80. So I spent the rest of the evening using the 8" SCT's GOTO, hopping around to the brighter deep-sky objects.

Once again, I had a gathering of spectators, as other observers were dewed out. I had cranked up my Kendrick dew heaters to high early on, and all the optics were dry. I stayed up till about 2:00 AM enjoying the smooth working of my equipment and the video images that were cutting through the fog.

### **08-16-2009 (Day-3) Sunday.**

Sunday morning dawned partly sunny. For awhile it looked like it was going to be a good day, but the thickening haze and weather reports calling for thunderstorms began to put a damper on things. My 'Observing the Sun' talk went well, but wasn't able to do any observing afterwards.

So I spent the afternoon back at the park office in the nature exhibit, where a local paleontologist, Sharon Valli, from Algoma University, explained to us what we could find in the area, and then took the group for a stroll along a fossil reef! The reef was exposed by the last ice age, where the glacier acted like a giant shovel, scrapping off all the upper layers down to the ancient seabed. It was interesting how thousands of years later, there was still little vegetation growing in the area:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-32.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-33.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-34.jpg>

Everywhere you walked/looked, you would find something:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-35.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-36.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-37.jpg>

With the incoming bad weather, about half the attendees packed up and went home. At sunset, it completely clouded over, and a big storm went through the area, dumping a large amount of rain. It continued to rain all evening.

Went to bed early!

08-17-2009 (Day-4) Monday.

Slept in till 9:00 am. After breakfast, with a mostly overcast sky, I decided to go for a drive and explore the island. I'd take in some hiking trails.

So I drove north, up Rt6, stopping at a number of scenic overlooks.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-38.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-39.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-40.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-41.jpg>

The island has a number of interesting hiking trails, thru large trees, and up along a ridge of 100 foot cliffs, called the 'Cup and Saucer'.

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<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-43.jpg>

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<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-48.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-49.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-50.jpg>

There's also a really cool waterfall, 'The Bridal Veil'.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-51.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-52.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-53.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-54.jpg>

And lots of small lakeside marinas:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-55.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-56.jpg>

The island offers lots of other activities besides astronomy.

Around 3:00 PM, I headed back to camp. At this point, most of the other campers had called it quits, leaving only four campers left, Terry & JoAnne, Steve, Sharon and their five kids, another couple, and myself.

Late that afternoon, the skies had started to clear a little, but on queue with sunset, a heavy band of clouds rolled in and it began to rain. It continued to rain the rest of the evening. So off to bed early again!

### **08-18-2009 (Day-5) Tuesday.**

The day dawned cloudy, but as the morning progressed, the Sun came out, and the skies started to improve. I uncovered my 8" SCT, and Terry assembled his 17" dob, and we demonstrated them to Steve's family before they had to pack up and leave for home. I spent the early afternoon on another hiking trip. After a mid-afternoon cloud-burst, the skies cleared, and with the help of a light wind, the Sun quickly dried out the observing field. It was looking like we'd get a really good night of observing. (our last of the trip). At sunset, all of the occasional puffy cumulus clouds evaporated into a beautiful clear evening. The wind died down and the sky quickly turned a deep blue as it became darker. Terry, JoAnne, and I quickly got our telescopes up and running. The transparency was very good and soon an incredible looking Milky-Way began to glow overhead. The dark rift in Cygnus was almost three-dimensional, extending south down into Aquila. Flowing northward into Cassiopeia and down toward the northern horizon in Perseus, there were many bright knots, with the areas around the Double-Cluster and Alpha Persei particularly brilliant. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, except unfortunately, for one band of cirrus that hung out all evening in Sagittarius, bisecting it and partly obscuring Scorpius. :( I was able to image a few more objects on my observing list, M52, and M76, but spent the evening using the Stellacam Ex with its wide field CCTV lens imaging the Milky-Way and other objects. Here's a picture of the Pleiades and the Andromeda Galaxy.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-30.jpg>  
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MSP2009-31.jpg>

Terry used his 17" Dob to observe a good number of Herschel Objects that he's been working thru, and JoAnne used her 10" Dob to go after Messier's. Occasionally, we would take a break from our own observing and walk around to see what each other was viewing. Toward midnight, off in the distance, we were serenaded by a pack of coyotes! Around 1:00 am the sky started going soft, so we packed it in. It was a great nite of observing, and the sky, why while still not the best of conditions, provided us with spectacular views.

### **08-19-2009 (Day-6) Wednesday.**

After breakfast, and showers, we said goodbye to Rita and Terry Gordon, campground and dark-sky preserve owners, and headed down the road toward the car ferry and Starfest.

Manitoulin Island is an interesting place. Besides the observing, I also enjoyed several day trips exploring and hiking on the island.

Wish I could say I had a 'great' time, but the weather put a damper on that! Only two nights of good observing! I thought Friday nite was good, and Tuesday even better, except for that darn cloud bank that hung out in Sagittarius all night.

But in retrospect, I don't think I will be going back every year.

It was just too much of a drive, the camping too primitive, and expensive, and I personally don't think the skies, even on Tuesday night, were that much better as the best nights that I've had at Cherry Springs.

(particularly, Wednesday evening of last year's Black Forest Starparty, where I was seeing the Milky Way over in Ophiuchus and central Scorpius, and a camper across from me was identifying the 'dark' South American Indian constellations made from the obscuring cloud rifts).

At most, Manitoulin's Tuesday nite was marginally better than that evening at CSSP. And, while I didn't get to see Manitoulin Island at its full glory, Cherry Springs is a much, much easier drive to get too, (cheaper), and offers a far superior observing field and facilities.

Still, overall, I'm glad that I did the trip.

I'd love to try going again sometime to the Manitoulin Island Starparty with a big group of Kiski Astronomers!!!

Larry