

Starfest Star Party 2009

Hi all,

Over the winter, fellow Kiski Astronomer Terry Trees convinced me to make the trip with him this year to the Great White North - Canada!!

We would first attend the Manitoulin Starparty, and then travel to the nearby Starfest convention, Canada's largest. That way we could make one drive, up and back, and take in both starparties over a 10 day stretch.

08-19-2009 (Day-1) Wednesday. *(last day of the Manitoulin Starparty)*

After breakfast, and showers, we wrapped up our Manitoulin Island Starparty adventure, said goodbye to Rita and Terry Gordon, campground and dark-sky preserve owners, and headed down the road toward the car ferry and Starfest. After an uneventful two hour ferry ride back to the mainland, and then a short two hour drive into central Ontario, we arrived at the Rivers Place Campground, home of Starfest, Canada's largest astronomy convention.

What a huge place!!! The observing 'field' was about three times the size of the field at Cherry Springs. There must have been at least 300 campers already there on Wednesday. (total event attendance was estimated at ~600). We quickly registered and got our camps in order, as it was going on 7:00 PM. Terry had signed up in advance for a full trailer hookup site. There was a little hill behind him that I was able to park my little teardrop on, and run a power line down to his popup camper. While at registration, I ran into Teri and Trevor from the Manitoulin SP, and they ended up setting up their tent across the road.

Here are a few pictures: (the place is so large it was hard to get a good shot or two)

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-02.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-03.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-04.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-05.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-06.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-07.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-08.jpg>

Here's a couple of pictures of my camp:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-09.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-10.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-11.jpg>

The sky had been mostly sunny all day, and with the approaching sunset, the few daytime clouds were disappearing. After getting the camp squared away, I quickly assembled the 8" SCT for the evening, and in the gathering dusk achieved a good polar alignment. Terry and JoAnne got out their 10" dob and setup on the hillside beside my telescope. We spent the next several hours hopping around to the various bright showcase objects.

Once again, I had a number of folks stop in to investigate my little teardrop camper and my videoastronomy setup. Around 11:00 PM, it began to cloud over, and most people covered up their telescopes for the night. I continued doing video observing for about another hour thru the sucker holes, but called it quits and headed for bed shortly after midnight.

08-20-2009 (Day-2) Thursday.

I awoke to a partially cloudy and windy morning. All day we had extended periods of sunshine, and the temperature and humidity stayed moderate. But, by 3:00 PM, when it was time for my talk on sketching, the storms started to roll in. Mid-way thru my presentation, I had to practically shout over the thunderstorm, but managed to complete the talk and group demo activates without too much trouble. We did lose power a few times, and the rain on the tent was loud, still, the talk went well, with a good attendance and questions afterwards.

Here's a few pictures of the small tent where I gave my presentations:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-20.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-21.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-22.jpg>

During the day, Kiski members Bob N and Suzie, and Bob K arrived.

About ½ hour after getting back to camp, a huge storm blew through. It poured for nearly an hour!! Small tents all around us were blowing down in the high winds, and people went running for their cars. Terry's and my camp came thru the storm mostly intact. (I had some damage to my tent canopy). Later my next door neighbor Sal mentioned that he observed a funnel cloud going overhead, and we heard reports on the radio that the small town of Durham just six miles away was struck by a F2 tornado, with numerous buildings damaged and one person killed. We were very lucky that the funnel cloud didn't touch down sooner and wipe out the convention. After the storm finally passed by 5:30 PM, the observing field was pretty flooded in places. Fortunately, being on the hillside, my camp drained quickly.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-23.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-24.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-25.jpg>

It didn't look good for any observing that night. The clouds and winds continued to roll by till close to sundown. Then the skies amazingly cleared off! Out came the telescope!!! For the next several hours we had beautifully clear and calm skies. While the Milky-Way wasn't as good as Tuesday night on the island, it was still enjoyable to see naked-eye. I was able to finish my video survey of the little Messier globulars in the Sagittarius region. (M54, M55, M62, M70, and M75). Terry and JoAnne got out their 10" dob again and also observed the brighter deep-sky objects and the planet Jupiter. Around 11:30 PM, the wind picked up, a bank of clouds suddenly swept in.

Within a matter of minutes we had a downpour. I was barely able to get the SCT covered in time. Fortunately for Terry and JoAnne, they had packed up about an hour earlier. I waited awhile to see if it would clear back off, but the best we got were sucker holes, so I took a stroll around the observing field to visit. I finally headed for bed at 1:30 AM.

08-21-2009 (Day-3) Friday.

Friday was filled with lots of scattered clouds and partial sun. It was also very windy!! Terry and JoAnne decided to pack up and they headed back to Pittsburgh around 1:00 PM. I gave my solar observing talk to a large very interested group at 2:00 PM. It was cloudy afterwards, so we couldn't solar observe afterwards. Spent the rest of the day going to a number of the other presentations, including one by a local Native American on First Nation sky mythology, and another by a NOAA spaceweather expert.

Here's a few pictures of the main speakers tent:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-12.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-13.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-14.jpg>

During the spaceweather talk, there was another downpour! Later it did clear off again around sunset, but this time the clear skies only lasted for about an hour, just when it was getting dark. So I covered up the telescope and walked around again, visiting with some of the other campers that I had met, particularly the members of the Hamilton Astronomy Club. The skies never did clear up, so I went to bed early, but around 3:00 Am, I did hear some of my neighbors out observing a clearing that went past.

08-22-2009 (Day-4) Saturday.

Saturday dawned cold and wet. It sprinkled off and on all day. After listening to the weather report, with no hope for clearing that evening, I decided to go ahead and pack up the telescope and as much of the camping gear as I could. Spent the day going to more of the speaker presentations, (enjoyed the talk by a local geologist on the Sudbury Basin asteroid impact, and got a sample of 1.4 billion year old Sudbury Basin breccia), shopping the vendors, and going to the swap table. I picked up a new red/white combo flashlight and a camera piggyback adaptor for my 8" SCT.

Here's a few pictures of the vendors:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-15.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-16.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-18.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-19.jpg>

and our favorite Kiski vendor - Bob K:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SFSP2009-17.jpg>

At 5:00 PM was the dinner banquet, a very nice spread!!! Then the door prize drawing followed at 7:00 PM. The North York club had a number of great prizes. Unfortunately, none of the Kiski members present won. ☹

The last speaker got a late start, so as it was still a little light out; I decided to skip the talk and instead finished packing my tent canopy. Afterwards, I once again walked around and visited with my Canadian friends. We did get a few short lived sucker holes giving us a glimpse or two of the Milky-Way, but by 10:30 PM, the skies had closed back up, so I went to bed early.

08-23-2009 (Day-5) Sunday.

Woke up early, had a quick breakfast and hitched the camper to my van. Hit the shower house one last time. (had my good tennis shoes stolen). Said goodbye to my camper friends and started the long drive back to Pittsburgh.

Starfest in central Ontario was a well run convention, and it was kind of exciting being among so many amateur astronomers. While it's a somewhat easier drive, I don't think that I will be going back on an annual basis. The skies were not as dark as Manitoulin Island, and while the skies are much darker than anything in the Pittsburgh area, again, they are not on par with Cherry Springs. (I even had a member of the Hamilton Astronomy club, who is a regular at CSSP tell me that). There are several significant light domes to the north, east, and south-west from the nearby small towns. Plus, the seasonal campers at the campground don't seem to be too accommodating to the event. They all had these little white-light solar powered garden lights all over the place, and one person had a gazebo all decked out with hanging lights! Plus, they tended to drive their cars after dark with their lights on. Finally, several of them had small golf carts that their kids were using to zip up and down the roads all day and into the evening. I was sitting in the main speaker tent during a presentation, and heard one do a lap around the tent with its built in stereo blasting some music! I couldn't believe it, but I guess the Starfest organizers couldn't do anything about what the seasonal campers did.

Cherry Springs is a much, much easier drive to get too, (cheaper), and offers a far superior observing field and facilities.

Wish I could say I had a 'great' time, but the weather, again, put a damper on that! Not a single full night of good observing! Still, overall, I'm glad that I did the trip. I'd love to try going sometime again in a couple of years to Starfest with a big group of Kiski Astronomers!!!

Larry