

Cherry Springs Star Party - 2010

The Spring of 2010 went quickly, and the month of June arrived! it was time for the great CSSP! As usual, Kiski Astronomers members were planning on travelling up to Potter Cty for the event. Bob K and Denny H headed up on Monday, June 8th, and had a great evening of observing. Bob N arrived on Tuesday. That is also when I made the trip, as I was waiting for a new videocamera to be delivered. It arrived around noon, and I was on the road shortly afterwards.

Tuesday 6/8/2010:

The drive up was mostly uneventful, other than the section of road on Rt 555, between Driftwood and Benezette, where it was freshly oiled and chipped. My clean white teardrop trailer looked like it had a tan. Good thing my van was already brown! ;)

Once past the road work, the drive was very scenic, with the tall forest covered mountains on one side of the road, and a wild river on the other. I arrived at Cherry Springs State Park around 4:00 pm, and quickly located Denny and the Bob's in our usual camping spot. They had their three Aliner popup campers all lined up in a row, with my little teardrop on one end. (a number of our friends from other clubs, Dennis, Mike, and Bob 'R' were also already there).

Some of the other campers walking by joked that we looked like something from Giza, with the Aliners being the pyramids and my camper the sphinx! LOL !!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/cssp2010-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/cssp2010-02.jpg>

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We also had some unwanted 'campers' join us - flies! When we were up to the park last month, there was a plague of tent caterpillars infesting the field. If you stood still for a minute, they would try to climb up your legs, thinking you were a tree. Well, this month the caterpillars were all gone, replaced by the 'friendly' flies that lived off of them.

(they were introduced by the DEP in order to control the caterpillar's that were killing the 'real' trees). The flies lay their eggs on the caterpillars, and when the larvae hatch, they eat the caterpillars.

The flies had really cleaned up the caterpillars, but now were themselves overpopulated. They were everywhere! While they didn't bite, they made for a nuisance, especially when they would land on your nice white telescope tube, and then leave a 'deposit'.

(they were generally attracted to white surfaces). I even had one land on my SCT's f6.3 focal reducer lens, which I had just uncapped, and which I then had to clean off the fly droppings. The rangers say that by the July new moon, the fly population will have crashed, and everything will be back to normal, bug wise.

While the sky was clear on the drive up, by 6:00 pm a thickening haze had begun filling the sky. We had reports of rain on the way. I decided to go ahead and setup my 8" Meade LX200GPS SCT telescope for the evening, which was good, as several lengthy clearings went thru the area after 10:00 pm, and I was able to get a rough polar alignment.

Prior to it getting dark, I experimented a little with the new camera. (a Samsung SDC-435, 1/3" color ccd chip, with up to 8 seconds integration exposure time ~ \$150).

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-02.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-03.jpg>

I mounted it on a tripod and attached a 24mm cctv lens for widefield imaging. The camera displayed a nice low-light color image of the campgrounds. The control buttons on the back of the camera and the OSD menu settings were fairly easy to use. After I have time to remove the internal IR blocking filter, the camera should be great for near real-time videoastronomy observing.

With the weather deteriorating, Bob K and Denny called it an early night, as they were tired from being up the night before. Bob N and I stuck it out for awhile, but we were both gave up on the sky around midnight, and went to bed.

Wednesday 6/9/2010:

Woke up early to the sound of raining hitting the camper. Rolled over and went back to sleep.

Finally got up around mid-morning, dressed, had breakfast, and visited with the other Kiski members. Spent the noon hour and early afternoon back in my camper reading, watching DVD's (old 1950's Flash Gordon TV series), and practicing my presentations on Sketching and Star Mythology that I would be giving on Friday and Saturday. It continued to rain hard all day.

The outside air temperature stayed in the low 50's, but my little camper heater kept it nice and warm inside. What a cold, wet, miserable day!

Everyone stayed in their campers and played with their laptops, read, listened to a radio, or watched movies. Throughout the day, more campers continued to arrive and setup camp.

(I felt bad for the tent campers who had to setup in the rain).

The observing field slowly began to fill up, with the weather radio calling for the rain to stop and a clearing later in the evening.

Toward the end of the afternoon, we decided to pile into Bob N's van and headed into town for dinner. We stopped at the Sweden Valley Inn on Rt 6. Good food, (with beer) and warm and dry!!!

While in town, the rain stopped and the sky began brightening, along with the temperature warming. The Inn was a popular place!! As we were leaving the restaurant, a group of amateur astronomers from the Mason-Dixon club came in.

As we drove back up Rt 44 into the mountains, we soon encountered low lying clouds and fog. Back at the park, more campers had arrived. There were probably close to 100 attendees on the field, with more continuing to come until dark. Even though the Clear Sky Clock showed it to be clearing overhead, the fog continued to build on the observing field to the point where you couldn't see any details a few campsites away. We were socked in!! Everyone called it a night and went to bed early!!

Thursday 6/10/2010:

After a good night's sleep, I awoke to bright sunlight streaming thru my camper's skylight! The outdoor temp was already in the mid-sixties. The fog had burned off and the ground was drying. It was going to be a beautiful day!! All morning and early afternoon it was sunny with a nice breeze. We spent some time doing solar observing with a friend of ours, Mike, who had a nice Coronado solarmax scope.

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/cssp2010-06.jpg>

There were several very large prominences on both the eastern and western limbs. After lunch, we walked over to the vendor's tent, where Jeff from Camera Concepts and several other vendors, including Astro Gizmos were open for business, and we all dropped a few bucks. ;) I picked up an extension mounting rod for my 8" SCT's red-dot finder, along with several sections of clear red Plexiglas for my monitors. (later in the week, I picked up from ADM, a heavy duty mounting bracket for my 80mm BOSMA Refractor). After dinner, we took a stroll around the observing field to check out all the cool telescopes that were setup! Attendees had kept pouring in all day, and there must have been a good 300 people now on the field, bringing with them a number of large telescopes of different design types and models, along with imaging equipment.

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We were fortunate in that a group who had setup across the road from us assembled a 32" f3.6 dob. (we noted to come back over later that evening). With the greatly increased number of attendees on site, the wireless internet connection, which had been sporadic at best, pretty much became unavailable.

I ended up turning off my wireless so as not to be bothered by the warning messages about not being able to connect. (Bob K and I had several conversations with Maxine H about the service, and she is going to try and get it fixed before July).

All afternoon, it was mostly sunny, with a moderate breeze. But, soon after sunset, thicker clouds rolled in to stay. I gave up on my imaging/observing plans and spent the evening redoing my polar alignment thru the sucker holes and working thru some other equipment glitches. When the occasional large hole went over, I did make use of my LX200's GOTO to pick off some of the brighter galaxies over in Coma Berenices, such as NGC4565. Stayed up till after 1:00 am hoping for a good clearing, but everyone soon gave up for the night and went to bed.

Friday 6/11/2010:

Woke early from the noise of fellow campers. I could tell from the skylight that it was partly cloudy. Throughout the morning and early afternoon, the skies remained mostly cloudy and hazy. That didn't stop more attendees who kept rolling in by the dozens. The CSSP organizers estimated that there were over 475 in attendance by Friday afternoon. The weather radio was calling for rain later, and thru the weekend. Bob N decided to pack up and head home. But, he should have stayed, as a few hours after he left, the weather patterns shifted and the skies cleared!! The rain was going to hold off till at least Saturday afternoon, with Friday being mostly clear overnight.

At 1:15 pm, I gave my 'How to Sketch Deep-Sky Objects' presentation at the shelter building to about 45 attendees. It was well received, with lots of follow-up questions.

I believe there will be several new 'Sketchers' tonight!!

Around 1:00 pm Fred K arrived and setup camp across from us in one of the few open spots remaining.

Denny and Bob K finally talked me into getting out my Coronado PST and Daystar .6 T-Scanner for solar observing. The PST showed the large limb prominence still around from yesterday, but all of the real action was visible thru the Daystar filter on the 8" SCT. There was much activity around sunspot group AR1081, located near the northeastern limb. Earlier in the day, a solar flare had erupted from the group, and the area was still very unsettled when we observed it that afternoon. There were several rapidly changing active surge prominences visible over the course of about an hour, on either side of the groups' main sunspots. It was quite exciting to watch it change over a several minute timeframe.

The skies stayed clear all afternoon and into the early evening. Everyone uncovered their telescopes and prepared for the evening observing. I attached all 3 of my videocameras: the StellaCam EX using the Canon 5.5 - 55mm widefield lens piggybacked on the 8" SCT, the StellaCam II mounted at prime focus of the 8", and the new Samsung mounted at prime focus of my BOSMA 80mm f6.3 refractor piggybacked on the 8".

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/cssp2010-07.jpg>

With it still light out, I tweaked the 80mm Refractor's alignment to the 8" SCT and brought all the cameras into focus.

While waiting for it to become dark enough to begin videoimaging, I visited some of my nearby neighbors, and was also visited by over a dozen folks wanting to check out my videoastronomy system and teardrop camper.

Finally, around 9:20 pm, Arcturus began to shine through the twilight and I was able to sync -align the Autostar and within 10 minutes was video observing M13! Spent the night sightseeing all the bright Messier Objects, such as M13, M57, M8, and M11, testing out the new Samsung camera mounted on the BOSMA 80mm f6.3 Refractor. It did a great job, even with the IR filter still attached. Here are a few test images that I captured:

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-dark.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-M8.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-M11.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-M13.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-M17.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-M27.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/SDC-435-test-M57.jpg>

(all single image 8 second exposures, only post processing is adjusting the contrast by 20% and resizing).

I didn't get a chance to capture comparison images with the StellaCam II, as something was generating noise waves on my system.

There was a couple from Canada setup across the field from me with a 10" Meade LX200, and we spent the evening going after the same objects and comparing the view both visually and thru the videocams. They really appreciated being able to see the central star in the Ring Nebula.

Around midnight, a high level haze began to move in, spoiling the observing conditions. The NOAA weather radio was now calling for storms before dawn. The Kiski group decided to pack in most of our scopes and walk across the road to wait in line and look thru the 32" f3.6 dob.

It was showing some spectacular views of the Veil Nebula thru a wide-field Ethos eyepiece. (30mm I think?)

There were long ghostly streamers of nebulosity that extended in either direction across the field of view and beyond.

It was like looking at a Hubble picture!! We stuck around for a view of a small planetary nebula (the Pillow Nebula?), but as it was getting late, and starting to cloud up, we headed back to camp. I stayed up a little while longer doing a little naked-eye Milky-Way observing thru the gaps in the clouds, but called it an evening at 3:00 am.

While not a great night, it was still very satisfying.

Saturday 6/12/2010:

I was briefly awakened at 5:30 am by a hard rain hitting the camper. By the time I finally rolled out of bed at 9:00 am, it was partly cloudy and the ground had dried off. As the radio was calling for severe storms, I quickly finished disassembling my telescope and packed away all of the cameras.

At 1:00 pm, I presented my talk on "Stargazing and Myths" to a packed house. Again, it went very well, and I had folks stopping by later with follow-up questions. Several expressed that they wished I had given the talk the day before, so that they could have better appreciated what they were stargazing at on Friday night.

Due to the continued severe weather forecasts, a lot of attendees broke camp and left for home. I decided to pack up my remaining camping equipment and take down my tent canopy. I even hitched up the teardrop to the van. All I had left to do was pack a few inside items and pull the power line. We had an early diner and killed time waiting for the 6:00 pm raffle. (we didn't win anything this year).

Around 5:30 pm, the skies cleared off. Sadly, the clearing lasted only a few hours, and by sunset we were back to mostly cloudy skies, with large sucker holes occasionally going over. That allowed for some limited observing, but by 11:30 pm, the skies closed up completely. It was off to bed!

Sunday 6/13/2010:

Sunday dawned cloudy, but dry. Denny woke me at 7:30 to say he was pulling out. Bob K had left about a half-hour earlier. After taking care of stowing the inside items and having a quick breakfast, I was on the road home by 8:15 am. The drive home was uneventful, but scenic.

While not once of the best conventions clear sky wise, this year's CSSP 2010 was still a lot of fun.

I'll be there next year!!

Larry McHenry