

## **Black Forest Star Party 2012**

A short month after the Hidden Hollow Star Party, it was once again time to pack-up the camper and telescope for another convention trip. This time, I was heading back to Potter Cty for the Black Forest Star Party, held at my favorite location - Cherry Springs State Park.

### **Monday 09/10/2012:**

Got a very late start, (2:30pm) for the drive up to Cherry Springs. My daughter Tara had borrowed the 'tow car' for a trip to Washington DC that weekend for a charity walk/run and did not get back into Pittsburgh until early afternoon. I had all of my stuff lined up in the garage, so it was short work to load the car and hookup the camper.

The drive up was uneventful, though I did drive like a bat-out-of-hell. ☺ Arrived at the park around 7:15pm and pulled-in at the usual Kiski club spot off of Cygnus Ave. A number of club members were already there, including Bob K, Denny H, Terry & JoAnne T, and good friends Dennis from York and Mike from New Jersey. As I was running out of daylight, I quickly got the camp in order, and setup a camera tripod with the Samsung SDC435 videocamera using a 3mm lens, pointed all night at the three big pine trees right below Polaris. I set the laptop to record a frame every 30 seconds and let it run all night. Here's the YouTube results from my Stellar Journeys channel:

<http://youtu.be/hBbfhpTmdg4>

I then assembled my 6" AstroTech RC in the dark and spent the evening doing multiple polar alignments, until Mr Murphy finally relented and allowed me to achieve a really decent align. I could do a good 45 seconds unguided, depending on what area of the sky I was pointing at.

Denny and Bob had completed setting up their telescopes earlier, and were now beginning their imaging runs for the night. The sky was one of the best that I've seen, with transparency being excellent and the Milky-Way putting on a good display.

With the alignment done, I pulled out the StellaCam's and my new power supply wiring harness, which promptly refused to work. So much for testing everything out prior to the trip! (guess Murphy wasn't quite done with me for the night).

After switching back to the old power supplies, I zeroed in the piggybacked StellaCam-II on the 50mm refractor to the StellaCam-3 on the 6" RC, and brought both cameras to focus. In between all of this, I grabbed a bite to eat from my food supplies, changed into some heavier clothes as the temperature plummeted into the low-forties, and finished arranging the interior of my teardrop camper. By now it was after 1:00am, so I just put the telescope and cameras thru a few test runs and powered them down for the night. After making sure that the Samsung was running fine, taking wide - fields, I climbed into the camper and napped for several hours. Got back up several times during the wee hours to check on the camera, and finally with dawn lighting up the sky, shutdown the camera and headed for bed ~ 6:15am.

**Tuesday 09/11/2012:**

Being up all night before, I slept in till 10:30am. After finishing up a late 'brunch', I assembled my easy-up tent and pulled out the table and chairs. During the day, Kiski member Fred K arrived and setup next to Bob and our friend Don P from the Hamilton Ontario club pitched his tent beside Denny. All day more folks arrived, and it was amazing how full the observing field looked three days out from the start of the convention!

Here's a pic of several of the Kiski members and Dennis from York:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-04.jpg>

The afternoon had beautifully blue, sunny skies, and the sky that night was simply incredible! While waiting for full darkness, Bob and I pulled up chairs and began naked eye observing the Milky-Way which was starting to appear. The fact that we could even see the Milky-Way while sunset was still lingering the northwest was amazing. The darker it got, the more spectacular our galaxy became! We ended up spending a good 45 minutes just sitting there admiring the glowing star clouds and the delicate dark-lanes bisecting them. This for me was undoubtedly the highlight of the trip!!

Finally, we reluctantly left our chairs to begin our observing programs.

Tonight, I worked on my Constellation Survey project, and began focusing on the small constellation of Microscopium, skimming low along the southern horizon, adding another 10 galaxies to my collection. I then moved eastward to Piscis Austrinus with its bright luminary Fomalhaut lighting up the southern fishes. There I added another 18+ galaxies.

After finishing off Piscis, I headed north to the giraffe - Camelopardalis, where I spent the rest of the evening video-capturing open clusters, galaxies, and planetary nebula. By then it was past 2:00am, the temperature dipping once again into the low forties, and having been up all the previous night, I hit the wall and decided to go to bed. What a great night!!

**Wednesday 09/12/2012:**

Once again, I slept in till late morning. After breakfast, I got out the Ha PST for a little solar observing. The Sun was in a semi-quiet state, with only a handful of limb prominences, and disk filaments, along with a scattering of small sunspot groups to observe. That afternoon, the crystal clear skies from the previous two days began to develop a little haze, signaling that here would be no magical skies that night.

After a late day nap, I prepared my observing notes for the evening.

Tonight I would go hunting after Barnard's Dark Nebula in the constellations of Scutum and Sagittarius! I started out by tracking down several nebulas in the outlying area around M8. Then I moved on to re-imaging some previously captured dark nebula, such as the Ink Spot. I found the StellaCam-II/50mm refractor quite useful in capturing a number of the larger dark nebulosity's among the bright star clouds. Around Midnight, I left off the Barnards, and began working on my list of missing Herschel-400 objects. You would think that having observed over 1100 deep-sky objects that I would already have all of them, but I was still missing close to 130 from the list of 400 objects.

After chasing down a half-dozen Herschel's scattered across the fall constellations, I decided to call it a night and was in bed by 1:30am. While the sky wasn't as good as Monday and Tuesday, it was still a great night compared to anything back home!

#### **Thursday 09/13/2012:**

After another lazy start to the day, Bob K and I went and walked the new portion of the hiking trail. We made sure to make plenty of noise tramping along the path, as earlier in the week, several park workers had spotted a bear eyeing up the camp ground. Even then, as we were rounding a bend, we spotted up ahead a coyote on the trail, who promptly took off after seeing us. The pace of the observing field really began to pick-up, with the vendor's tent going up, and the comings and goings of attendees. Fred K decided that he'd accomplished what he wanted to image and packed up for home. He'd only been gone for a few hours when Kiski member Bob N arrived and took Fred's old camping spot. Here's a pic of Bob setting up his little tent shelter: <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-02.jpg> Also, Winnie and John L arrived with their larger camper, which they had to park along the fence to the north of us. But they did setup their big 12" Meade SCT in an empty spot between Denny and Don.

Here's a group photo: <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-03.jpg>

Later in the day, the vendors began to arrive. Included was Kisk member George K of Astrocards: <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-06.jpg> Our good friend Jeff from CCTS was also there: <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-07.jpg>

Along with Eric L, Mike from Niagara, a number of our other observing friends also arrived and pitched their camps a few roads over from us toward the western end of the observing field. Here's a pic of Eric and his big dob: <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-14.jpg>

The afternoon skies were hazy, with scattered clouds, and the NOAA weather radio was calling for partly cloudy conditions overnight. As soon as darkness fell, I began my observing program. Once again I had the Samsung camera on a tripod, going for a time-lapse video of the Sagittarius Milky-Way hanging over the observing field. Earlier, I captured a few seconds worth of frames to start the video out in daylight, and then I waited till sunset to restart the frame capture. While the Samsung was chugging away, I went back to work on my missing Herschel-400 objects, most of them open clusters up in Cassiopeia, and later in the evening in Auriga. The Milky-Way was noticeably dimmer tonight, with hints of high-level haze scattered around the sky. Around 10:30pm, banks of low-level clouds began flying over. After several hours of jumping around between sucker-holes, I finally gave-up on the Herschel hunt, and killed a little time socializing with the group, allowing the Samsung to accumulate a few more seconds of video frames. For awhile it cleared off, but by 1:30am, the clouds rolled back in, and we were done for the night.

Here's the YouTube results from my Stellar Journeys channel: <http://youtu.be/i3y41g2Py90>

**Friday 09/14/2012:**

Friday morning dawned partly cloudy and cool. The forecast for the day was rain later that afternoon. Spent the morning with the group over at the vendor's tent looking for things to buy that I 'needed'.  
Denny H and Mike from New Jersey decided to pack up and head home that afternoon. It didn't take long for their empty campsites to be filled by new arrivals. By now the observing field was getting quite full. I settled in for a little afternoon reading and a nap. By late afternoon the sky had mostly clouded over with more ominous looking clouds. Around 7:00pm, they finally let loose the wind and rain, and we all headed inside our campers. Felt bad for the late arrivals who pitched tents in the rain. After a few more hours of reading and listening to the rain softly tapping on my camper's roof, I decided to go to bed early and catch up on some much needed sleep. Around 2:30am, I was awakened by voices outside. I opened the camper vent and looked out. The rain had stopped and it had cleared off to a very dark sky. I thought about getting dressed and joining in outside, but the cold temps in the forties, and everything being damp, led to a quick decision to crawl back into the sleeping bag,,,,,

**Saturday 09/15/2012:**

Was up bright and early, the observing field had become too nosily, even with ear plugs to sleep in long. The sky started out clear, but soon went back to partly cloudy. The temps stayed in the sweatshirt/jacket range all day, but the NOAA forecast called for clear and cool conditions that evening! Looked like we were going to get in one last night of dark sky observing! Headed down to the vendor's tent late in the morning to check out the swap tables. Winnie had a picnic table full of old books that she was taking darksky fund donations for. She brought in over \$100 for the fund. Dennis from York, along with another buddy Nick were also there.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-08.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-05.jpg>

That afternoon, Bob K, Bob N, and I went for a stroll around the observing field to check out the various telescopes assembled for the evening.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-10.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-11.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-12.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-13.jpg>

Also that afternoon, Terry T gave a well attended presentation on ancient Greek astronomy. Bob N sat in on the talk, and I listened in for just a bit as Terry had presented the same talk to the Kiski club back in May.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-09.jpg>

At the end of presentations, we assembled at the pavilion for the great raffle prize drawing. The Kiski Astronomers luck continued with Bob K winning a great looking Moonlite Focuser!

With sunset fast approaching, we headed back to camp, uncovered our telescopes and prepared for the evenings observations.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-15.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-16.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-17.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-18.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-19.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2012-20.jpg>

As it was the public night and I didn't have any serious imaging planned, I volunteered to show the public what video-astronomy is all about. Once the park's program ended at dark, I spent the next several hours with over 60 visitors, showing them the big and bright Messier objects over in Sagittarius - M8 the Lagoon Nebula, the globular cluster M22, M17 the Swan Nebula and then moving up into Scutum for M16 the Eagle Nebula. The night started out clear, but a high-level haze had moved in at dusk, dimming the Milky-Way, and then toward 11:00pm, bands of clouds began to pass over.

A group of around 20 scouts that had been the first to visit, stopped back on their way out for views of M31 the Andromeda Galaxy, along with the edge-on spindle galaxy NGC891, and the Silver Coin Galaxy NGC253. They wanted to see the planet Jupiter, but it hadn't made it up over the tree-line yet, and by the time it did get high enough, the sky had clouded completely over. After they had left to walk around some more, I did manage to grab a quick image of Jupiter thru a sucker hole and froze the images on the video cameras in case they came back.

With the sky closed down, the Bob's packed away their equipment and headed for bed. I put a few things away, but left the main telescope and cameras running. Around 1:30am, the sky cleared off to better conditions than what we had at the start of the evening. Don P and I went for a walk over to Eric L's camp, where he, Mike from Niagara, and the other members of his group were still observing. There we spent the next hour chasing down galaxies with Eric's big dob. Finally around 2:30am, seeing Gemini and Orion well placed above the eastern horizon, I headed back to my camp and started working on a few 'winter' Herschel's.

I was able to video-capture some great views of the Flame, Horsehead, and Running Man nebulas. I could have kept going all night, but as a five hour drive awaited me the next day, I called it a night at 4:00am!

### **Sunday 09/16/2012:**

Barely made it up in time to say goodbye to Bob K as he pulled out. After a quick bite for breakfast, spent the next several hours packing in the telescope and camp. During that time, I saw Bob N and Dennis off home. Once I was ready I drove over to make my goodbyes to Eric L, Mike and the gang. Look forward to seeing them and everyone else again next year. Made the drive back to Pittsburgh by 5:00pm that afternoon. Just in time to get stuck in Steeler football traffic.

So this concludes this year's 2012 Black Forest Star Party Convention!  
After 5 good-to-great nights of video astronomy observing, this was the best  
trip of the year!!!

I'll have my video-observations of the various deep-sky objects that I imaged  
over the past week processed and online sometime later this fall.

That will include three new constellations: Microscopium, Piscis Austrinus,  
and Camelopardalis, with over 50+ new deep sky objects video-captured.

I'll also be updating my Dark Nebula page with over a dozen new objects, and  
will be creating a new webpage for the Herschel Objects.

Please visit my Constellation Tour page at:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lsmch/constellationtour1.htm>

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Astronomical Webportal:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lsmch/>