

Astroblast - September, 2014

Finally!!! After a long wet summer, the weather patterns shifted and brought cool dry air to Western Pennsylvania for the entire week of Astroblast.

Thursday 9/25/2014:

I was able to re-arrange my work schedule by taking the entire day off on Friday and working-from-home that Thursday. That allowed me to load the camper & car the night before and head up to the ORAS Lockwood Observatory late Thursday afternoon. After enduring the Pittsburgh rush-hour traffic, my drive up I-79 was uneventful. A short right on I-80 and before long I was taking the exit for Franklin, PA. Arrived at the Lockwood Observatory at 6:00pm to find about a dozen other astronomers already there. I quickly setup camp to the north side of the observatory near Tom H, and Mike F, and assembled my telescope - 8" Celestron SCT optical tube and CGem mount and attached my StellaCam astro-video cameras. By dusk I had the cameras focused and telescope polar aligned and settled in to wait for full darkness.

I started off with Constellation Survey work up in Cepheus, going after several bright planetary nebula and galaxies, among which were PK107-2.1, NGC7139, NGC1184 and NGC1544. I then moved on to attempting a number of faint 'Local Group' galaxies in Andromeda: AND-I, II, IV, V, and VII. Most of these were pretty faint, barely visible on the monitor. Around midnight, I switched over to my new Arp Peculiar galaxy survey, video-capturing quite a few galaxies over in Pisces, including the following: NGC7757(ARP86), NGC7603 & B(ARP92), and NGC7679 & 7682(ARP216). Finally around 1:30am, the long day and drive caught up to me, so I closed down for the night and went to bed. Overall it was a decent night of video-astronomy. (Tom H stayed up till dawn, imaging the Horsehead nebula in Orion).

Friday 9/26/2014:

Woke late to a beautiful day! As this was the final 'Astroblast' at the old location, I went for a walk around the observatory and took a few last pictures of the building:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-01.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-02.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-03.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-04.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-05.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-06.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-07.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-08.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-09.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-10.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-11.jpg>

Then that afternoon, I went on a tour of the new ORAS observatory site, led by Tim S. which is located about 25 miles away near state game lands between Franklin and Clarion PA. At the moment, the field is a little rough, but the sight-lines are very good, with ORAS members from already observing on-site having determined that it was much darker there with a dark southern horizon stretching from the SE to the SW. It all looks very promising!! I'm really looking forward to camping & observing there next year. Here are a few labeled site photos:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-12.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-13.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-14.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-15.jpg>

For more info, visit the ORAS webpage at: <http://www.oras.org/>

Back at the current location, the number of attendees camping on the field had gone up to around 30 astronomers, including John & Kelly O, and Dan H. Other ORAS club members were on hand, running the food vendor tent, registration & door prize table, and opening up the observatory for the evening presentations. Lots of good company! The sky all day had been a clear dark blue, and as night fell, it soon turned into a great night of observing, the best I've ever had there! Even John O thought it was excellent. The only downside was the bright Franklin light-dome to the SSW that spoiled views of the Sagittarius / Scorpius Milky-Way. But, overhead, the Cygnus Milky-Way & Great Rift stood out prominently, riding up from Perseus in the NE, and sliding down the sky thru Aquila to the SW.

I setup my Samsung SDC435 video camera with a 3mm CCTV lens on a tripod, pointed toward the SW end of the observatory and made a time-lapse video, (1 frame every 20 seconds for about 7.5 hours). Didn't come out as well as I had hoped for a combination of various reasons:

- *There was an unshielded red-light hanging under the food vendor tent that wasn't very noticeable to the human eye, but it blew-out the auto-exposure of the camera. It also threw a bright refraction defect on the camera lens to the upper center-right of the frame.*
- *Was late on manually refocusing the camera as it switched over to night-mode, got distracted by visitors.*
- *Finally, I didn't realize that I would be shooting straight into the Franklin light-dome until too late.*

But, as this was the very last Astroblast at the ORAS Lockwood Observatory site, it will have to do. I'll have to try again sometime in the future at their new observatory, once it's built. Here's a link to the video: <http://youtu.be/eOsRGXfSt80>

While the time-lapse was recording, I started the night off over in the NE, chasing galaxies in Camelopardalis. Was able to capture NGC2268, 2346, 2366, and IC467 among others. In the middle of this, I spent some time demonstrating my video-astronomy setup to a number of ORAS members including John O, Tim S, and Dan H. All were quite impressed with the detail that can be seen using just an 8" SCT and a deep-sky video camera!

The sky conditions continued to be excellent through-out the night, with minimal dew. At 11:00pm, I pulled out the Arp Atlas and began hunting peculiar galaxies over in Pegasus, Pisces, and Cetus. Eventually video-captured NGC7469(ARP298), NGC1134(ARP200), MGC-1-58-9(ARP314), and IC167(ARP31). My polar alignment allowed me to go up to 50 seconds unguided exposures, letting me see good faint detail on the video monitor. I continued video-observing until 2:00am, when I finally ran out of gas. Would like to have gone longer, but I was just too tired. Powered down the equipment, covered up the scope, and went to bed a happy astronomer!

Saturday 9/27/2014:

Slept in late and woke with a scratchy throat. I think I finally caught the cold virus that was going around work. That explains why I became tired early the night before! Spent the late morning re-charging batteries and preparing my notes for the afternoon talk on the Herschel's. The presentation was well attended with over 25 folks sitting in. By then, there were probably 60 convention attendees camping and driving in for the day. Later that afternoon, I went for a walk around the observing field and took these pics, starting off with my campsite and the 10" Dob that I was selling for the Kiski club:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-16.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-17.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-18.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-19.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-20.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-21.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-22.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/AB2014-23.jpg>

I stopped by the registration desk and bought a few door prize tickets for later that evening and sat in on John O's interesting talk on how to match eyepieces to your telescope. I think I learned a bit of good info, if I only still used eyepieces,,,,, Back at camp, I relaxed a little, reading the latest Sky & Tel issue with the article on Library Telescopes, in which one of our members, Dave K, was quoted about the Kiski Library program. I then took in the 5:30 pm presentation on the AVI-NRAO Chile Ambassador program. Very interesting!!! Then came the pizza party and door prize raffle!! I kept up the Kiski winning tradition by taking home a map of Saturn, a book on Carbon Stars, and an astro card game.

Late that afternoon, a high haze and patchy clouds began to roll in from the west. The partly cloudy predictions for the evening looked to be coming true. Once it was dark, I quickly fired-up the telescope and video cameras. After re-focusing the cameras on Altair, I slewed the scope over to nearby M11 and froze the image on the monitor. I then went in the camper to change into warmer clothes, as the temp was dropping rapidly, (or it could have just felt that way due to my cold). It was a good thing that I froze the camera image, as when I came back out about 20 minutes later, most of the sky had clouded over. But I was able to show the public who were walking around the image of M11 that was still on the monitor and give them handouts of what they might be able to see later that night. Within about a half-hour, the sky mostly cleared off and I then gave a video-tour of the bright late-summer and fall Messier showcase objects such as the Swan, Eagle, and Lagoon nebulas, globular star cluster M22 and the Great Hercules cluster, along with the Andromeda and Pinwheel galaxies. They were all big hits, even impressing some of the long time ORAS visual observers.

Finally, by 10:45pm, most of the visitors had left, so I settled into a light night of observing, first focusing on a few constellation survey objects in Cassiopeia and Andromeda. I then moved on to Perseus and video-observed quite a few small galaxies including NGC1003, 1058, 1136 & 1465. Never really thought about Perseus, being a Milky-Way constellation, having so many galaxies.

A little later, after Auriga had cleared the tree-line, I pulled out my open star cluster survey list and went after a half-dozen Dolidze clusters including Doldz-5, 16, 18 & 20. Around 1:00am, a fog layer began building in the observing field and started overpowering the dew heaters. I took that as a sign to pack-in for the night. So overall, Saturday night was more like the typical Astroblast - occasional light haze and clouds and a ground fog!!

Sunday 9/28/2014:

Woke to a hazy morning, still damp from the dew. My head cold had gotten worse, making packing up all the more 'fun'. Said my goodbyes to the ORAS crew and headed for Pittsburgh and Home by 11:00am. Despite getting sick, it was still a very good trip! Looking forward to a future Astroblast at the new ORAS site.

Larry McHenry

Astronomical Webportal:

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