

Cherry Springs Star Party - June, 2014

With this year's June Solstice, it was time to pack the new camper and head up to Cherry Springs State Park for the 2014 Cherry Springs Star Party. A couple of us from the Kiski Astronomers decided to make a full week out of the event and headed up that Monday. The weather forecast was 'iffy', but we hoped for the best.

Monday 06/23/2014:

After checking out the weather for Cherry Springs that morning, I made the final decision to 'go', and loaded the observing equipment into the car. I had to make a few local stops first, but finally headed out of the city around noon for the park. The GPS estimated an arrival time of about 4:30pm, which at this time of year would still give me plenty of time to setup camp well before dark. Under partly-cloudy skies, the drive up was uneventful, except for the orange-cone 'flowers' blooming on the roads. As usual, once past Benezette, on Rt555, the drive was very scenic!

I arrived at the park close to 5:00pm and found several of our starparty friends already there - Dennis & Carol from York, and Mike M from New Jersey, along with Don P from Hamilton Ont, and Mike from Niagara. There were already about 30 some astronomers already on the field for the week. Several who had been there for a few days said that Sunday night was excellent observing.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-02.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-03.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-03a.jpg>

I pulled up next to Don and quickly got my camp organized.

Soon Bob K pulled in and picked his usual spot next to Mike.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-04.jpg>

As the weather had taken on a 'stormy' look, we focused on getting our camps in order. I also went ahead and assembled my telescope in hopes of getting a polar alignment later that evening.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-05.jpg>

(AstroTech 6" RC optical tube on a Celestron C-Gem mount with a StellaCam-3 peltier cooled wireless astrovideo camera).

That paid off, as once the sun had set, the rain threatening clouds subsided and we had a partly clear sky for a short period, allowing me to get in my initial two-star align, followed by an accurate polar. But, by the time true dark fell around 10:30pm, the sky closed up for the night, and we were all off to bed.

Tuesday 06/24/2014:

After sleeping in and a late breakfast, I spent the day visiting with the other campers and watching the weather. Several times during the day, the wind would pick up and large thunder clouds would loom around the horizon, but it never rained. Went for a short hike along the trail leading out of the western side of the observing field. Once the path splits away from the snowmobile trail, it meanders thru a nice stand of big trees.

I particularly enjoyed the area around the little wooden bridge that crosses the stream. After spying rain clouds building up once again, I turned around where the path crosses East Fork Road and headed back to camp.

That afternoon Mike from Niagara, who had been there for the past week, decided to pack up and head home. It was good timing for him, as with watching the 5:30pm WPSU weather channel, we realized that our luck had run out and we were going to get pummeled later that evening. Within the hour, a strong storm hammered the observing field. For near 30 minutes there was non-stop high winds and a driving deluge of rain! Watching from inside my camper, the gravel roads turned into temporary streams, and any low areas became small ponds. At the height of the storm with lightning strikes all around, the power flickered and died, a number of tent canopies gave up, and some folks were seen running for their cars. After the storm finally subsided, we inspected the damage. From our group, Don had one of his canopy poles snap and the canvas roof filled up with water like a kiddie pool, and Bob actually had water driven inside in spots around the roof seams of his Aliner. My little Tab teardrop came thru nice and dry inside, but outside I had an ankle deep pool underneath my easy-up tent around the back of the camper, along with blown over table & chair. I also had an aquarium size sack of water on one side of the tent roof and ended up causing the fabric to tear trying to drain it. Some of the other campers weren't so lucky. I watched one fella during the storm having to stand in his tent doorway holding on to the tent to keep it from blowing away, soaking him and the inside of his tent. Another had to move his tent to higher ground to get it out of the lake it was now located in. Finally, one astronomer had his SCT telescope & mount blown over by the high winds, damaging it. Fortunately the soggy ground must have lessened the impact so at least his optics didn't break.

After confirming that the power was out in the main restroom, along with the toilets, we soon had flashing lights, flares, and volunteer firemen from Couderdport on the main road. A number of trees had come down taking the power lines with them, blocking both E Fork road and across Rt44. The firemen were stopping all traffic in front of the park entrance, waiting for the utility company to arrive to handle the live wires on the road. Across the street, off in the distance at the far end of the old airport runway, a tree was burning from a lightning strike and the fire department from Galeton came out to handle that. The weather continued to drizzle, so I headed inside the camper to read. (thank goodness my new camper came with onboard battery power!). Around 9:00pm, the utility company restored power to the campground - yea!! Stayed up for awhile longer reading and went to bed at midnight. Was woken several times over night by heavy downpours and thunder.

Wednesday 06/25/2014:

Not much to say about today, as it rained for most of it. Just when you thought the rain was done, another downpour would pass over. The observing field stayed a swamp for most of the day. Finished off the book I was reading. Throughout the day, a number of other campers continued to arrive. That afternoon, Nick and a companion arrived and setup by Dennis, and Tracy N setup next to Bob K.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-06.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-07.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-08.jpg>

By evening, there were probably about 75 folks present. After dark, everyone headed in, so I watched a movie and went to bed early. A few more showers passed thru during the night.

Thursday 06/26/2014:

Finally, the rain began to taper off, and with a light breeze and occasional sunshine, the observing field began to dry.

We paid a visit to the vendor tent that was now open for business, where I purchased a new filter wheel for my LRGB imaging filter set from Jeff N of CCTS. <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-09.jpg>

Bob K and I spent lunchtime loading it up and troubleshooting an issue where one of the filters was rubbing the wheel-side.

The clearing skies brought a new deluge of attendees pulling in and hunting for the better camping spots, which were fast becoming elusive.

Bob N from Kiski pulled in next to me, and Fred K pitched his tent between Bob and the Sky-Shed observatory.

Here's a picture of Bob's telescope and some of the gang.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-10.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-11.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-12.jpg>

A number of my other friends including Eric C from Lancaster, Tony D from Bethel Park, and Eric L and his father from Allentown arrived and setup.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-13.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-14.jpg>

That afternoon I drove down to Coudersport in search of a copier machine. I had forgotten to pack my public handouts for my presentation the next day and for the Saturday evening public night. Finally found one at the Post Office! On the way back, I drove thru a storm along Rt44 in Sweden Valley, which had me concerned for the observing field. But once I got back to Cherry Springs, I heard it was just a short-lived sprinkle and the skies were back to partly sunny. Even though I was only gone for about 2 hours, the park had really filled-up with folks and was getting full! There were campers and tents all over the place. By the end of the day, there were well over 350 amateur astronomers on the field!

With sunset, the few hold-over clouds dissipated, and soon the telescopes were uncovered and everyone quickly went about finishing fine-tuning their equipment and went about their observing. Soon the Milky-Way in Cygnus was rising high in the east with the Sagittarius starclouds glowing brightly along the southern horizon. The dark rifts were quite prominent, with the 'Galactic Dark Horse' standing out nicely. The transparency was excellent!! With all the rain the previous 3 days, it didn't take long for the dew to become very heavy, covering everything. Walking under the tent canopy would get you dripped on! I cranked the Kendrick Dew heater up to high, and my optics stayed clear all night. I started off working on my open cluster project lists, capturing a number of 'Dolidze' clusters in Sagittarius, Ophiuchus, Cygnus, and Cepheus.

Here's an image of Dolidze-55, Cygnus: (6" RC f5 & StellaCam-3 @ 15 seconds)

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/Dolidze55-06262014.jpg>

And Dolidze-57, (also known as NGC7510) in Cepheus: (15 seconds)

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/Dolidze57-06262014.jpg>

I eventually wrapped up the evening searching for Local Group galaxies using Alvin Huey's guidebook: UGC-9749 in Ursa Major, UGC-10822 in Draco, and IC-10 in Cassiopeia. Here's galaxy IC10 in Cassiopeia: (6" RC & SC3 @ 30 seconds)

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/IC10-06262014.jpg>

I finally called it a night around 2:30am.

It was one of the best evenings at Cherry Springs in some time!

Friday 06/27/2014:

After sleeping in till 9:00am, I quickly grabbed a bit of breakfast and hurried down to Lyman Run Park to the shower-house.

The speaker presentations started today, and I was on at 2:00pm with my talk on William and Caroline Herschel and their catalog. After getting back, I killed the intervening time visiting and comparing observing notes with our group and spending a few more bucks on things I 'needed' down at the vendors.

My presentation and Don P's talk on Cosmic Doom beforehand went well. Lots of good questions at both the end of the talks and afterwards back at the campsite. Don enlightened us on all the various ways by which the Universe was out to get us, and I think those who attended my talk gained a whole new appreciation of the work of the Herschel's and their contributions to modern Astronomy.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-15.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-16.jpg>

More folks continued to arrive during the afternoon, and the observing field was beginning to reach capacity. I heard casually that the hosting club, ASH, had sold-out the event and was expecting their largest crowd ever. It certainly was looking like it! We took a walk around the observing field, and here's a few pictures I took along the way.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-17.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-18.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-19.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-20.jpg>

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<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-22.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-23.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-24.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-25.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-26.jpg>

Late that afternoon the sunny skies began to give way to hazy skies with scattered clouds. At dusk, the sky was mostly obscured, with only a few bright stars and the planets Mars and Saturn dimly visible. After an hour or so, a lot of folks turned in for the night.

They should have stuck it out, as by 1:00am, the sky cleared off, and it became an overall decent night, with occasional cloud bands passing thru. The dew was light, had just a small amount form on the telescope tube. Once again, I spent the early part of the evening working on open clusters, which my StellaCam-3 video-astronomy camera was able to pull out from the hazy skies. Several 'King' and 'Czernik' clusters in Aquila & Vulpecula, and a bunch of 'Berkeley' clusters - also in the two previous constellations, along with Sagitta and Lyra. Berkeley-45, Aquila: (6" RC & SC-3 @ 15 secs)

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/Berkeley45-06272014.jpg>

After the clearing hit, I moved on to chasing down Webb Objects - mostly nebula and galaxies in Vulpecula, Delphinus and Cygnus.

Here's galaxy NGC6946 in Cygnus: (6" RC f5 & StellaCam-3 @ 30 seconds)

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/NGC6946-06272014.jpg>

And nebulas IC5067 and IC5076 in Cygnus (@ 30 seconds)

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/IC5067-06272014.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/IC5076-06272014.jpg>

It was a good thing I got in an afternoon nap, as while I wasn't planning on staying up really late, there was always 'one more object' to try and video-observe. Finally called it a night around 3:30am, and crawled into bed.

Saturday 06/28/2014:

The general noise of the observing field finally roused me out of bed around 10:00am. (plus the camper was getting warm inside).

After lunch, I decided to switch optical tubes on my C-Gem mount from the 6" RC to my 8" SCT. I had earlier purchased new mounting brackets for the C8 and I wanted to try it out with my new filter wheel. After a couple of hours moving all the accessory brackets around, and running back to the vendors for another part, I finally got everything reassembled, (Jeff N from CCTS was a great help!) But, I needed to wait till dark to finish realigning and focusing the cameras. In hindsight, that proved to be a mistake for later that evening. Should have left the 6" RC installed and taken a nap instead.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-27.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/cssp2014-28.jpg>

During my optical tube switch-out under mostly sunny skies, I began noticing a good number of folks packing up and leaving. I couldn't understand that, as the weather was fine, and the clearsky clock forecast for the evening kept improving. I guess they were spooked by the less than optimistic NOAA forecast of partly cloudy skies overnight and rain on Sunday. By the time of the 5:15pm door prize raffle drawing, a good quarter of the field was empty. That was a shame, as they all ended up missing out on a decent evening of observing, with a mostly clear sky. I guess I should thank them for increasing my odds at door prizes, as I managed to win one of the 2 day stays at a local cabin! Don P from our group also won a couple of tee-shirts!

Shortly after sunset, a huge crowd of public 'night-trippers' descended on the park, and I was soon busy answering questions on my setup, giving out handouts, and trying to get the telescope in shape to show folks deep-sky objects. I was really kicking myself for not leaving the 6" RC optical tube on the mount as it would have been ready to go.

After a bit of hastiness, I finally was able to get the scope on a number of showcase objects, such as M13, the Ring and Dumbbell nebulas, and finally the Eagle nebula. The public was quite impressed with my videoastronomy and camper setup. Must have entertained over a hundred people for the next couple of hours. Overall, the night's 'seeing' was a bit soft for imaging, but it was still pretty good evening for video observing!

After the public crush finally died down post-midnight, I was able to spend some time experimenting with the filter wheel, primarily comparing views of M27 and M57 planetary nebulas between the IR Luminance and O-III filters. The results were interesting, but I'll need to continue this in my backyard observatory with using the filters before heading back up to Cherry Springs for my next trip in August. I want to start trying my hand at monochrome LRGB imaging.

Didn't really accomplish much more than playing with the filter wheel. I wanted to stay up longer, but had reached a point where I was so tired that I was practically stumbling around like a drunk! So I covered up the telescope around 2:00am, and once again crawled into bed.

Sunday 06/29/2014:

After about 6 hours of sleep, I crawled out of bed to begin packing up. Once everything was loaded and the camper attached to the car hitch, I made my goodbyes and headed off around 11:30am to Pittsburgh.

Pulled into the driveway back home around 5:00pm.

So that concludes the 2014 CSSP adventure. I wish we would have had more clear night, so many deep-sky objects - not enough time,,,

Looking forward to heading back up to Cherry Springs in August for the Black Forest Star party!

Larry McHenry

Astronomical Webportal:

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