

Kiski Astronomers at Cherry Springs - May, 2014

hi all,

Several of us from the Kiski Astronomers decided to take advantage of the long holiday weekend and headed up to Cherry Springs.

Thursday 5/22/2014:

The weather forecast for the Memorial Day weekend was somewhat 'sketchy', depending on which source you used. After watching the news stories Wednesday night on the major flooding in nearby Elk County, I was a little concerned for the field conditions, but the skies at Cherry Springs are always worth taking a chance on, so Bob K and I decided to head up north.

After a late start, the first half of the trip was uneventful. Once at the I80 DuBois exit, I soon began to see signs of flooding along Rt 255, and especially along Rt 555. The streams were still running high, and up over their banks in places. Along the way, you could see high-water marks where the water had run over the road. Any low spot in the yards and fields now contained small lakes. The campground located next to Dents Run, just past Benezette, use to have a nice long white wooden privacy fence separating it from an adjacent property. Now that fence was in pieces, with panel sections washed over a quarter-mile away, and the campground closed. All along the valleys, there were still numerous never-before seen water-falls coming down the hillside cliffs. The fast flowing muddy-brown water made for an interesting contrast against the new 'spring growth' verdant green of the steep hills and the blue sky overhead.

I arrived mid-afternoon, and setup next to Bob K, who had arrived earlier.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-02.jpg>

There was around a dozen astronomer's setup on the field for the afternoon. We again had to move over a row, as the power was still out in our normal 'Kiski' location on the observing field. (Bob talked with one of the rangers, who told him the repairs had been finished that day, and the electrical posts in that section would be turned back on after the weekend). As the observing field was still rather soggy, we had to carefully pick a high spot to setup on. In some places, just walking on the field would leave small puddles in your footsteps.

The weather that afternoon continued to be very good, giving us hope for a great evening of observing. Bob and I quickly got our telescopes assembled and cameras attached. Then around 6:00pm, we were jinxed!

With the clouds thickly rolling in, there was no observing that evening.

With the threat of rain, Bob pulled his camera and optical tube off his mount and packed them away. I decided to leave mine covered for the night.

After a little reading, it was off to bed early.

Friday 5/23/2014:

The day dawned partly-cloudy, and continued to stay that way for most of the day, with an occasional light-shower. During the day, more folks arrived, including our friend Mike M from New Jersey, who setup camp next to me.

Eric L from the eastern side of the state also arrived and setup his big DOB in his usual corner spot.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-03.jpg>

There were a number of 1st timers there, with hopes of catching the much publicized meteor shower early the next morning. Bob and I spent some time filling them in on how things 'worked' at the park, along with some other area attractions such as the PA Grand Canyon. For a while, late in the afternoon, it looked like a clearing was on the way, along with possible observing that evening. I took the opportunity to align & focus my cameras on the 50mm 'video' finder and the 6" RC. Also setup my Samsung SDC435 & wide-field lens on a tripod and recorded some 'cloud' videos. But, once again our hopes were dashed, as around 7:00 pm, we were clouded-out. The evening continued to be clouded covered, but dry, so it was another night of reading and watching movies. I set my alarm and got up to look out several times during the early morning hours, hoping for a clearing, but it never happened.

Saturday 5/24/2014

The clouds stayed thick until after sunrise, when they finally began to break. By the time I finally rolled out of bed, it was sunny and warm, with a slight breeze. As it never really rained overnight, the dew quickly burned off and the observing field finally began to dry out.

Several of the folks who came just for the meteor shower, (which we heard afterwards was a dud), packed up and left, but they were soon replaced by new arrivals. Eventually, there were a good 75 people on the observing field

That afternoon, Denny H arrived and setup on the end of the row by Bob K.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-04.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-05.jpg>

We gave him a hand in getting his tent canopy up over the area where he was assembling his telescope. It was a good thing too, as several times, a passing cloud band would drop a sudden shower. Eventually, by 6:00pm, the sky had completely cleared, and everyone began uncovering and preparing their telescopes.

I did a quick walk around the field and took a few pictures.

Here's a shot of my setup, Bob, Mike, Eric, Tom H with his new guidescope adjuster bracket:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-06.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-07.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-08.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-09.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-10.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-11.jpg>

and a few others:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-12.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-13.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-14.jpg>

Once it was dark enough to see Polaris, I did a quick polar align and brought the StellaCam's to a fine focus. I then proceeded to trip over the power - supply, dislodging the telescope power cord enough to cause it to lose power, and bumped into the StellaCam-3. Mr Murphy had come a-callin,,,,, After re-doing the previous work, I opened up my observing list & manuals, and did a few practice slews around the sky, waiting for full darkness. Here's a 30 second shot of the 'Whirlpool Nebula' taken using the SC3 & 6" RC, one last showcase object before my evening program of video -observing faint fuzzies. <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-15.jpg>

Working from the back of my new teardrop Tab camper, I began with chasing down a number of faint Local Group galaxy members located in the constellations of Hydra, Sextans, Virgo and Leo, utilizing Alvin Huey's great observing guidebook. These included Sextans A & B, and Leo I, II, A, and T. All of these are quite faint, barely visible on the monitor screen, even after a 35 second exposure. Probably didn't help that most of them were well past the meridian, heading toward the horizon.

After bagging these, around 11:30pm, I took a break and walked around to see how Bob, Denny, and Mike were making out. While I was chasing down galaxies, Bob spent the evening again working with his new field-flattener. Despite all his efforts and adapters, he couldn't quite reach the necessary focal distance to get perfect shaped stars across the entire field. Bob decided he needed to make a new spacer ring once he was back home. He pulled the field - flattener from the telescope and went back to his normal optical configuration for the rest of the evening. Denny spent time imaging dark nebulas, and Mike was able to get a really nice wide -field image of the Rho Ophiuchi complex.

Upon returning to my camp, I turned to my "Night Sky Observers Guide" by Kiski Astronomers Bob Kepple & Glen Sanner to the chapter on Virgo to capture more of the myriad galaxies in that constellation. Using my Celestron C -Gem goto connected to the planetarium program ECU (Earth Centered Universe) on my laptop sure made it easier!!! ✍

After video-capturing about 20 new galaxies in Virgo, it was now getting toward 1:30am, and Scorpius was riding the meridian. At that point, I closed the book on Virgo, and pulled out my Collinder open cluster list and began tracking down the handful of 'Cr' clusters lying in the deep southern reaches of the scorpion's tail. The prettiest of these was Cr318, which also contains Trumpler-24 as part of the cluster. Here's a shot taken with the SC-II on a 50mm finder at 8 seconds exposure:

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/CS-May2014-16.jpg>

Unfortunately, about half the other Cr's that I still needed to capture were below the tree-line! Argghh!

As these are all -42 or greater in declination, I probably shouldn't try to include them anyway as 'observable' on my Collinder Cluster webpage.

In addition to the Cr's I also video-captured the last two missing 'Harvard' clusters from my project list. This gives me all 11 out of 20 Harvards that are visible from our latitude.

By now, it was shortly past 3:00am, and I was beginning to flag.

As I had accomplished my observing program for the night, I hopped over to the nearby Lagoon (M8) and Triffid (M20), stopping at the Eagle Nebula (M16), and left the camera taking 30 second exposures of the "Pillars of Creation". Bob had already turned in around 2:30am, and Denny was busy taking darks.

I decided to walk over to see how Eric was doing visually with his large 24" DOB truss-tube reflector. He was flipping thru some charts, and asked if there's anything I would like to look at. So with the 'Star Queen' fresh in my mind, I asked for that. After taking a good look visually, with a low-power eyepiece that showcased the nebula in Eric's telescope, we walked back across the road to my setup, where we compared the view with what my 6" RC & StellaCam-3 was displaying on the monitor. It's nice to have the opportunity to observe the same deep-sky object both 'old school' visually in a big scope, and then thru a high-tech 'video-enhanced' imaging telescope. Both give different, yet still beautifully spectacular views!

To finish off the night at Cherry Springs, I pulled-up a chair for a naked-eye view of the glowing starlit center of our own galaxy, the Milky-Way, arching up over Sagittarius! Went to bed a 'happy camper'!!!

Sunday 5/25/2014

After sleeping in for most of the morning, I reluctantly packed up the telescope and broke camp. Finishing up my good-byes to those staying, I headed back to Pittsburgh around noon. So, once again, another single night of observing, out of three, but that one glorious night at Cherry Springs was well worth the drive!

Larry McHenry

Astronomical Webportal:

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