

ORAS - Astroblast: September, 2017

The summer went by quickly this year. It was now mid-September and time for the Oil Region Astronomical Society's Astroblast convention.

Friday 9/15/2017:

Spent the morning packing and didn't get on the road till almost 1:00pm. Fortunately, the ORAS observatory site is only about 2.5 hours' drive-time from Pittsburgh, so even with all the orange cone-flowers in bloom along the way; I was still able to arrive before 4:00pm. While stopping in at the members building, I ran into George G from Pgh, and then Mike from near the airport. As there were now electrical hookups around the sides of the observatory building, I decided to setup close by and plug in. Ended up picking a spot in-between Tom H and Mike.



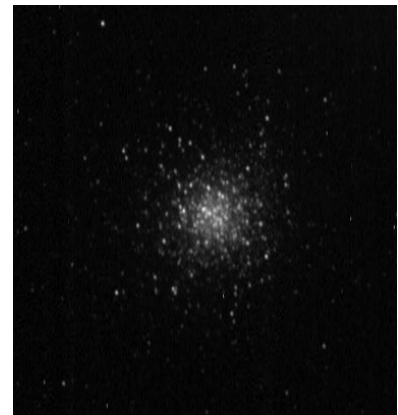
Up on the hill above the observatory were Steve and Deb P.

Spent the next several hours getting my camp together and assembling the telescope: a Celestron 8" SCT optical tube on a C-Gem mount, with 80mm Kson refractor and 60mm Arcturus refractor piggybacked, with StellaCam-II & 3, ASI120MC, and Polemaster cameras.



The patchy clouds had given way to full Sun, and it got hot! During the late afternoon, other ORAS members and attendees arrived, including Tim S and John O.

By evening. There was about a dozen astronomers setup around the observing field. At 7:00pm, I gave my "Observing Obscure Star Clusters" talk to the small group down in the classroom at the members building. Afterwards, I hurried back to camp and quickly did a Polemaster align and GOTO Sync on the C-Gem mount. While working thru the mount initialization, a fog began to develop and heavy dew began to lay on every surface. I cranked the heaters to high, which kept the telescope optics dry, while the rest of the telescope was dripping wet.



After a brief visit to the Ring Nebula - M57 in Lyra, and the Great Hercules Star Cluster - M13, I was ready to hunt Herschel galaxies. But the fog thickened, and rose over our heads obscuring the Milky-Way with a more 'local' nebula, and soon all but the brightest stars and the planet Saturn were lost in a foggy oblivion.

I joined Tom and Mike over in Tom's big camper to swap stories and wait out the fog. But with the dewy mix growing thicker, we finally called it a night at 11:30pm, and I headed back over to my camper. Turned off the telescope and covered up for the night and headed for bed.

Saturday 09/16/2017:

Woke to a hazy, dewy morning. After breakfast, I uncovered the telescope to let it dry off in the Sun, which by then had burned-off the last of the fog.

Gave John O a hand in cleaning up the observatory building in preparation of the new 30" reflector being delivered next week. While there, Dan H dropped in to visit and see the progress on the new facility. After lunch, I walked down to the member building and registered with Marianne H. At 2:30pm, I gave my talk on "Solar Observing and the Great American Eclipse" to about a dozen folks, a number of whom also traveled to be in totality. Afterwards, we had a great discussion on everyone's experience.



6:00pm was the pizza party and door prize raffle, where I won a new Astronomical League ball cap and a set of eclipse postage stamps.



I then walked back up the hill to camp and prepared the telescope and my observing notes for the night. But soon, the fog began to build once again, lying heavily on the observing field.

It was forming at the top of the hill on the northern edge of the tree-line and rolling downhill, breaking like a wave on the southern tree-line. It was beginning to look like a repeat of Friday night.



I turned the dew heaters to high and went inside the camper to change into my observing clothes. Once back outside, I powered-up the computer and cameras and after syncing on Altair in Aquila, and tweaking the focus, I slewed the telescope over to Hercules high in the north-west. I figured that as long as I pointed the telescope toward higher sky elevations that the faint Herschel fuzzes that I planned on hunting wouldn't be quite so fuzzy from the fog.

The overall images looked usable, but anything 25 degrees or lower was lost in the muck. Soon worked my way thru NGC6150, 6175, 6195, 6241, and finished with 6283. During the hunt, Mike stopped over and visited for a while and watched how I did video-observing. At that point, I was about the last man standing, as everyone else had been dewed or fogged out. The truss dobs had fallen victim pretty early, and the dew heaters failed on the others. With the fog getting worse, I moved over to clearer skies in Draco and video-captured a bunch of faint galaxies - NGC5777, 5881, 5987, 5989, 6079, 6143, 6182, 6338, and finished with 6434. With the hour going on midnight and the fog finally winning out, I called it a night.

Sunday 09/17/2017:

Woke to another foggy morning. Based on the promising weather forecast, I decided to stay one more night. But soon, everyone else was packing their gear and breaking camp. Said my goodbyes to Mike, Tom, Steve & Deb, Marianne, and John O. Soon I had the observatory field to myself.



Spent a quiet afternoon reading and taking a nap. It was a sunny warm day, so I kept to the shade. While sitting behind my camper trying to keep cool, I noticed two bright saucer-shaped objects nearby that looked to be hovering just above the ground. Thinking that perhaps either the heat was getting to me or that the little green men had come to take me away, I grabbed my phone camera and went to investigate. The 'saucers' were actually rather large flat mushrooms growing up in the field. I'd say these guys were at least six inches wide. I had a sudden urge to go find some cheese and pizza sauce,,,,,



After dinner, I uncovered the telescope and reviewed my plans for the evenings observing session. I was hoping that the third night would be charm for good observing, but once again, at dusk, the fog began to form on the field. I decided to make the best of it, and turned the dew heaters to high.



Fortunately, the fog never became as bad as the previous two evenings and stayed mostly to the lower sections of the field. I decided to spend the evening in Bootes, trying to catch Herschel galaxies before they got too low in the western sky for the season. By 11:00pm, I had worked my way thru a dozen galaxies including NGC5677, 5737, 5747, 5751, 5760, 5789, 5798, 5856, 5888, 5902, 5922, and 5966. With Bootes wheeling low into the west, I decided to move to another location higher up in the celestial vault. But after taking a break and spending a few minutes sitting back and relaxing in my chair, taking in the naked-eye view of the Cygnus Milky-Way overhead and doing a little binocular stargazing, I decided that this was a good stopping point for the night. As I had the field to myself, I flicked-on a couple white-lights and soon had the telescope and cameras broke down and packed in the car. Off to bed at midnight.

Monday 09/18/2017:

Once again, woke to a foggy morning. Everything was soaked, and as it looked like it would be several hours before the Sun could naturally dry the tent canopy and chairs, I decided not to wait and just threw it all into the back of the SUV.

Finished packing up camp and plugged in Cherry Springs into the GPS.

It was now time to head-up to the BFSP!

So this brings to a close the 2017 ORAS Astroblast.

Looking forward to next year and the completed observatory with its 30" reflector!

Larry McHenry

Astronomical Webportal: <http://www.stellar-journeys.org/>