

Cherry Springs Star Party - June, 2017

With the Summer Solstice a few days away, it was time to pack the camper and telescope for the 2017 Cherry Springs Star Party. The weather forecast was 'iffy' and hot. Over 85 degrees expected for Saturday, so I decided to delay my heading up to the park until Sunday.

Sunday 6/18/2017:

Finished up packing and hooking up the camper and was on the road by 9:30am. It was already hot. The drive from Pittsburgh was uneventful, starting off in clear skies, but soon the puffy daytime heating clouds began to build. I decided to stop for lunch along the way, so after driving my usual Route-28 to I-80, I headed up to St Mary's for a burger. I then continued my journey to the park, taking the backways through the small towns of Emporium and Austin.

Arrived at the park around 3pm to find that Bob K from the Kiski Astronomers setting up in our usual section of the observing field. I pulled up across from him and quickly got my camp in order, as dark clouds began moving in out of the west over the park.



Radar showed a line of heavy storms approaching, so I hurriedly battened down the hatches! Nearby, Dennis and his wife, along with Nick and Jane were also busy setting up. Tony, Gary, Conrad and the usual gang were already at the park, down in the southern observing section, and Bob and Paul from York were across the road from Bob and me. After visiting with some of the folks, I decided to assemble my telescope, just in case it cleared up later, but I had barely got the mount on the field tripod when raindrops began to fly. Got everything covered up and headed inside the camper to wait out the light rain.

At dusk, the rain let up, so Bob and I went for a stroll to drop in and visit with some of the other astronomers. After we got back, I headed in to read. Early to bed that night, but was woken up several times during the night by heavy rain.

Monday 6/19/2017:

Slept in till 8am and woke to a damp field. The temp was cool, in the mid-60's and an occasional shower went thru. Stopped raining long enough to make breakfast outdoors and then it was heavy rain the entire morning. The observing field was nice and flooded. The rain finally tapered off around noon, and the Sun occasionally popped out. As the field began to dry, I pulled out tent canopy and set that up next to the camper, and got out the folding table and camp chairs.

At 3pm, Denny H from the Kiski Astronomers pulled in with his Aliner and took his usual spot next to me. Also, Craig from Ohio, and Scott from Canada pulled in and setup nearby. I worked on completing my telescope assembly, adding the Celestron 8" SCT optical tube to the C-Gem mount, along with the 80mm Kson refractor and 60mm Antares guidescope and StellaCam video-cameras.

But before long, a strong line of storms approached and it was a race for Denny and I to get as much setup as possible before it hit. Finally, with sprinkles coming down, I covered up the telescope and headed inside for dinner. For the next 20 minutes, I was entertained by a deluge engulfing the field and our campers. Once again, the park was a swamp! I even thought I saw fish leaping in the stream that was once my road!

By 5:30pm, the storm had moved thru and the sky cleared and the Sun was back out by 6pm. Tracy N from Delaware pulled into the park and setup to my other side.



While he was getting his camper leveled, Denny and I went back to working on our telescopes, and I finished running the video cables and balanced the mount. Another quick line of showers rolled over the park, interrupting our setup, but at least we got a nice looking rainbow afterwards!



The sky continued to be partly cloudy through sunset, but the radar showed a new line of storms heading our way. It slowed down getting to the park long enough for Bob, Denny, and I to get our telescopes polar aligned, but then the sky closed up, so we covered up.

After standing around for a bit discussing the weather, the 'weather' decided to begin sprinkling, so we all headed in for the night. Stayed up and read for awhile, listening to the rain tapping on the camper roof. In bed by midnight

Tuesday 6/20/2017:

Woke to a partly sunny sky. There was a light breeze blowing and temps were in a cool low 60's. The observing field began to dry out. Soon the park maintenance showed up and mowed the field. At noon, we all went over to the CCC double-pavilion for an appreciation lunch for Chip H, who had just retired as head park ranger of Cherry Springs.



All afternoon the sky stayed partly sunny with a nice breeze. The weather forecast for the evening looked promising. More folks pulled in for the upcoming starparty including Mike M, Brian, and Gordon.

After dinner, everyone uncovered their telescopes and prepared for observing. My plans were to continue with the Herschel-2400 survey work up north in the Great Bear - Ursa Major, And then over in the south-west in Virgo.

At dusk, Bob and I went for a quick walk and stopped in to visit with Conrad, Gary, Elliot, and Tony.



With it getting dark, we headed back and gave Tracy a hand installing his Polemaster. Once it was dark enough to see Polaris, I re-did my polar alignment with the Polemaster and then achieved a fine GOTO alignment on the C-GEM mount.

Then I spent the next hour chasing gremlins in both my SC-II widefield 80mm video-finder and the ASI ZWO120MC autoguider on the 60mm. Eventually, I was able to get the SC-II to cooperate, but the autoguider continued to act up, so I finally gave up on using it for the night. Fortunately, my earlier polar-alignment was accurate enough for doing nearly a minute of unguided exposures, which is about what I would normally do anyway.

I then settled into my video-observing routine and spent the next 90 minutes hunting faint Herschel galaxies about the Big Dipper. These included NGC2629, 2641, 2650, 3027, 3043, 3102, 3182, and 3188.

Bob and Denny were busy with their own equipment and observing plans and Tracy, after getting his mount polar-aligned, spent time doing wide-field photography with several fish-eye DSLR cameras.

Shortly after midnight, a wave of clouds sent Bob and Tracy packing it in, but Denny and I stuck with it and was rewarded with a clearing that lasted past 1:00am.

Then about a quarter past one, the sky rapidly clouded over with low dark clouds and Denny and I hurried to shutdown and cover-up our telescopes. We barely made it as while putting on the last covers, the few sprinkles turned into a downpour! I quickly closed up the clamshell back of the camper and headed indoors. In bed by 2:00am. Overnight, was woken by several heavy storms.

Wednesday 06/21/2017:

Woke to a partly sunny sky. The observing field was still wet from the early morning showers. At 10am, just as things were drying out, an intense downpour hit, once again flooding the field. Within a half-hour, the rain had stopped and the Sun was once again out. Our group spent the early afternoon sitting around under our tent canopies and talking 'astronomy'.

With the weather forecast for that night turning excellent, more amateurs began to arrive at the park and setup camp and telescopes, including Frank W from Pgh and Eric L from Reading, PA. I decided to pull out my new DSLR Skywatcher 'Star-Adventurer' mount and attached my Samsung camera with a fish-eye lens and soon had it panning across the observing field taking time-lapse images.

Then it was time for an afternoon nap! (Yea Naps!) After dinner, Bob, Denny, and I went for an early evening stroll and dropped in to visit a few folks. Lots of nice telescopes were now uncovered so I snapped a few pics.







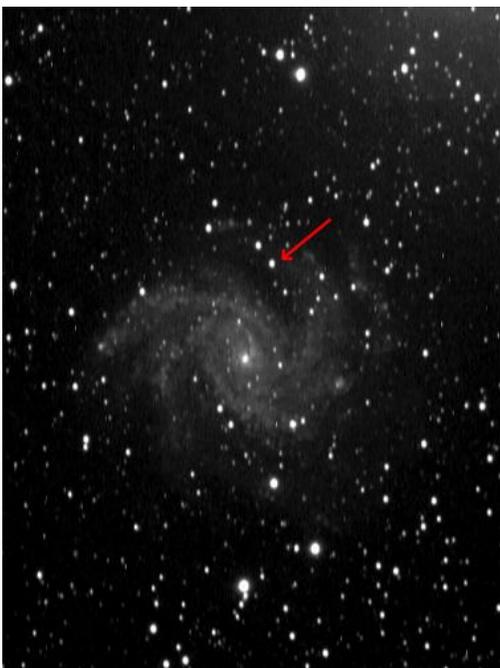
By now the field was probably 3/4's full with hundreds of amateur astronomers!



After we got back from the walk, I changed into my cooler weather observing clothes. It was supposed to drop into the upper 40's tonight, brisk! I then prepped my telescope and observing plans for the evening. Once it was dark enough, I rechecked my polar alignment with the Polemaster, made a few slight tweaks for a spot-on alignment.

I thought I had figured out my autoguider issues, but it continued to be a pest. I even tired switching out laptops, but that introduced new issues, so I reverted back to the older machine. Finally figured out that I had too many USB devices plugged in and trying to run at the same time, so after disconnecting the wireless keyboard, the autoguider was happy and worked flawlessly the rest of the week.

With the Milky-Way glistening in the south-east, I proceeded to hunt Herschel Objects for most of the evening, starting in Libra with NGC5729. I then moved up to Corona Borealis for NGC6038, 6103, and 6142. Then on to Ursa Minor for NGC5034, 5144, 5712/IC4470, and NGC5832. Along the way I stopped over in Cepheus to video-capture the new Type II Supernova (2017eaw) in galaxy NGC6946, the 'Fireworks Galaxy'. (SC3 @ 180 seconds) Also swung by the Bubble Nebula, NGC7635 in Cassiopeia. (SC3 @ 3 minutes)



At 4:00am, while video-observing the last faint fuzzy in the Little Dipper, I noticed that it started to look a bit washed-out. Thinking that perhaps my optics were dewing up, I stepped away from under the camper clamshell and quickly realized that dawn was beginning to break!! There was Venus rising in the East over the tree-line! So Denny and I, being about the last ones still up, packed it in and by 4:30am headed off to bed. It was a great night of observing!!!

Thursday 6/22/2017:

Slept in late, with the warm camper finally waking me. After lunch and heading down and back for cleaning up at Lyman Run park, several of us headed over to Keeners for Ice Cream. Once back at the park, the Vendors tent was open for business!

So Bob, Denny and I headed over to say hello to our friend Jeff N of CCTS, and parted with a few greenbacks! While there, the Sun went in, and it soon began to rain soaking the field. It continued to rain, off and on for the rest of the afternoon.



I went inside the camper and worked on building a time-lapse from the other night, and discovered that I had the mount 'pan' speed set too high, so that video project didn't really turn out. After the rain died down, we lounged around camp under the tents. For dinner, Bob, Denny, Tracy, and I went in on a pizza, after which we had to go walk it off with a stroll over to the southern side of the observing field. For a while, the sky looked like it might clear off, but by sunset it had once again clouded over and a line of storms had formed to the west.

With the night air getting 'buggy', we all headed in. Stayed up for a while trying to read, but kept falling asleep. Finally gave up on the book and went to bed. Woke in the middle of the night from hearing folks outside, but after taking a look at the hazy sky with just a few stars poking thru, I decided to crawl back into bed.

Friday 06/23/2017:

Was up early to see Bob K off, as he had to head back to PGH for a family event. It was a dreary damp morning with a slight drizzle. Spent the mid-morning preparing for my afternoon presentation on 'Obscure Open Star Clusters'. Later, Denny and I visited the Vender Tent where I picked up a red-screen for my phone.

At 1:00pn, I headed over to the pavilion where I gave my talk to a good size crowd. Once back at camp, I spent the afternoon lounging inside my camper and watching it rain. The weather radar showed a huge 'blob' of rain heading our way. No observing tonight!!



During the day some folks packed-up and headed home, but more soon showed up to take the vacant spots. The observing field was probably close to 85% filled. At dinner time, Denny and I headed over to Fox's for cheeseburgers.

At 7:30pm, we walked over to the pavilion for an impromptu cloudy-night open discussion and were joined by another 12 - 15 amateurs. Denny and I showed some of our pictures and videos. Several folks shared stories about observatory 'animal' encounters, so I told them about the groundhog getting inside my observatory and chewing up the place. It was an entertaining session for a rainy Friday evening. Afterwards we went for a walk around the field until it got dark. You had to be careful where you stepped, as the mud would pull your shoe off.



We then called it a night and I headed inside. Watched a little TV and read a magazine. Early to bed.

Saturday 06/24/2017:

Woke to a sunny, clear sky! According to Brian and Gordon, it had cleared off about 2am. The weather forecast looked pretty good for the evening.

John and Wini L from the Kiski club arrived around 10:30am, in time to setup a table for the swap meet. Soon they had a crowd looking at their goods.



Denny and I stopped in and talked with the Meade Rep and picked up a couple of nice solar eclipse viewers. We headed over to Fox's for lunch and then sat around and visited, waiting for the afternoon talks to begin. We also checked out the raffle door prizes and dropped a few buck on tickets.

Denny, Tracy, and I took in the afternoon talks: introduction to the new Park Ranger staff and park plans, the Dark sky report and the Keynote speaker Bob Naeye about the 'Great American Eclipse' coming up in August. Lots of good information from all three.



Then it was time for the raffle. We all ended up winning! Tracy, Denny, Mike, and myself!



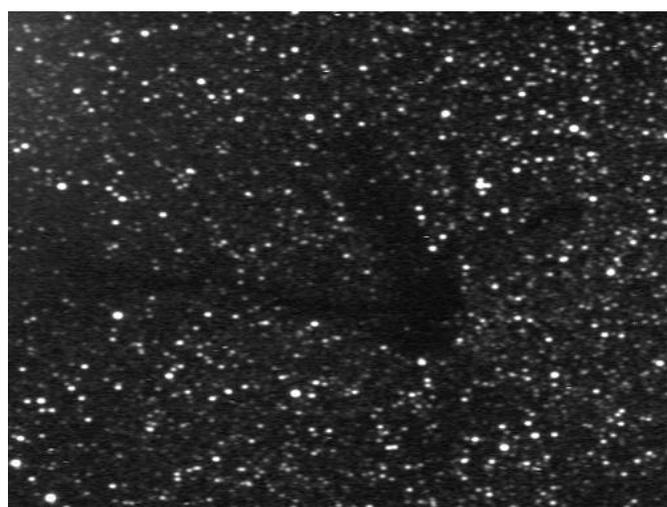
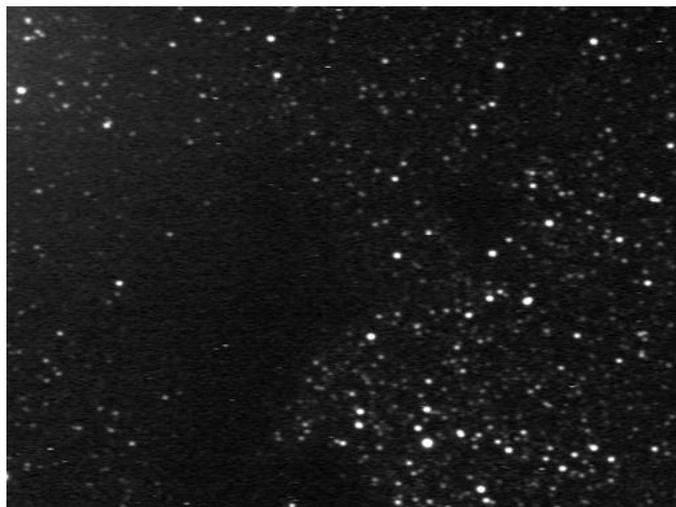
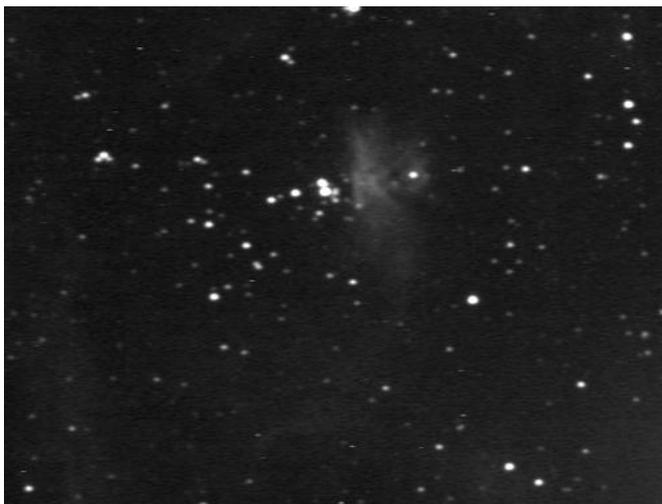
Once the raffle was over, we headed back to our campsite to prepare for the evening observing. The sky looked really great! Uncovered the telescope and pulled out the night's observing notes. With some time to kill before dark, I went for a quick walk about the field and took a few photos. There were a lot of amateur astronomer's setup with their telescopes, along with a very large crowd of public visitors walking around.



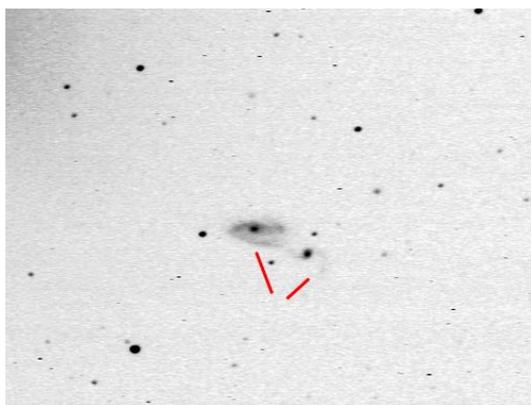


Once it was dark enough to see Polaris, I did a quick polar alignment check to make sure the field tripod hadn't sunk-into the field and thrown it off, but everything was still good. Had several dozen people stop in to see my equipment, so I spent the first hour of darkness showing off the usual showcase Messier objects.

Once the crowd moved on, I settled in to my observing plans, starting off in Scorpius. After pulling in several low planetary and emission nebula in the scorpion's tail, NGC6072, 6334, 6337 and 6357 I headed higher-up to Scutum the shield to hunt dark nebula. B100, 101, 103 and B104. (pictured below: NGC6334, NGC6357, B103, and B104)



I then slewed the telescope over to the north-west to look for Arp galaxies in Canes Venatici - ARP-84: NGC5394 & 5395.



While observing in Draco around 1:00am, a line of clouds began moving in and soon the sky was mostly overcast. After consulting with the radar, we decided to cover up our telescopes, which was a good thing, as with little warning, 20 minutes later a hard rain began to rapidly fall, sending everyone scrambling to finish. After closing up the clamshell observing area, I headed inside the camper to wait it out, but by 2:30am, with low clouds still hanging over the field and the radar showed no openings in sight, I decided to call it a night and went to bed.

Sunday 06/25/2017:

Woke early from noise of other campers packing. I quickly dressed and packed-up the inside of the camper and moved outside for breakfast while tearing down the telescope. I was soon joined by Tracy and Denny working on their own equipment. By mid-morning I was ready to roll, so made my goodbyes and set out for home.

While the amount of observing time that I got in this trip wasn't as much as I would prefer, it was still enjoyable being with my fellow amateur astronomers at Cherry Springs!

I'll look forward to next year's CSSP!

Larry McHenry

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