

Mason Dixon 2008

Hi all,

For the second year in a row, I attended the Mason-Dixon Starparty, along with other Kiski Astronomer's Bob Kalan, Denny Hill, and Bob Novak & Sue. I arrived mid-thursday afternoon and camped diagonally across from Bob Kalan. The convention is located west of York, PA. on the grass taxi-way of a small airport field. The taxi-way is long, wide, and very flat!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-06.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-07.jpg>

About the time I finished getting the camp ready, Denny showed up and got the spot next to me. (Bob Novak came on Friday and was able to back into a small spot directly across the taxi-way from Denny and I, a few camps down from Bob K). So we were all fairly close to each other, which made the socializing nicer!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-02.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-03.jpg>

For almost the entire event, the weather was very warm and humid. Thursday and Friday afternoons, you could wring out your shirt from all the sweat. Saturday, you had to wring out your shirt from all the rain!!! ;)

With sunset on Thursday evening, the sky mostly cleared off, and we all set about getting our telescope mounts aligned.

This was the first 'field' outing for my new-used wedge and tripod for my LX200GPS 8", so I spent some time working the kinks out.

After leveling and manually aligning the mount to magnetic north, I initialized the GPS and did a one star polar align. Then I tried a technique that I had found on a Meade website called the Iterative Method, where you select and goto an alignment star, use the handbox to center & sync, then do a goto back to Polaris. After the telescope stops, you eyeball where Polaris shows up in the finder crosshairs and manually use the wedge adjustments to move Polaris half-way to the crosshair center. Then you goto back to your alignment star. You repeat this until Polaris finally shows up dead center in the finder & main scope eyepiece. Using this method, I was able to get a great polar alignment that throughout the weekend kept whatever object I was observing centered on the video chip.

After spending some time getting the polar alignment down, I attached my Stellacam Ex and prepared to do a little videoastronomy.

By then, the sky conditions had started deteriorating, becoming hazy with scattered clouds. I had barely centered and focused on my first object of the night, M3, when the clouds quickly thickened and the sky clouded over.

We were obviously done for the night, so Denny, Bob K, and I packed-in/covered up the telescopes. It was a good thing we didn't hesitate long. I was the last one of us to cover up, and was putting my accessory cases in the car when I felt something on my neck. I first thought it was the mosquitoes back for another piece of me. (even the Deet wasn't keeping them away earlier in the evening).

Then I realized it was rain drops.

When a few short minutes, it turned into a downpour! You should have seen the other campers scrambling to get their camps and telescopes covered. Luckily, all Bob, Denny, and I had to do was dive into our camps and call it a night.

Sometime after 3:00 am, it cleared off and Friday dawned bright and clear. After we roused out of bed and cleaned up a bit, we spent some time with the vendors.

I was scheduled to give a presentation that afternoon on solar observing, and later that evening on videoastronomy, so I went down to the little barn where the York club held their talks and setup my displays that went with the presentations.

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<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-05.jpg>

Around noon, I uncovered my telescope, attached the solar filters, and woke the mount up from park. There wasn't much to check out on the Sun in either the Daystar H-alpha filter on the 8", or the PST CaK piggybacked on the 8". After the early afternoon solar talk, I gave a solar observing session at my campsite for an hour or so. Around 4:00 PM, with clouds starting to build, I put the scope back to sleep and covered it up to cool off.

(I also needed to cool off as the humidity was shirt soaking!)

Shortly after that, Bob Novack & Sue arrived, so we helped them setup.

I wasn't much use, as I had to prepare and leave for my early evening video talk. Finishing that up, I headed back up to the campsite, where the Bob's and Denny were keeping an eye on the sky conditions. By then, with the day heating, the weather was about like yesterday - hazy and scattered clouds, with a few looking a little darker rain-filled than we liked.

Still, we decided to uncover the telescopes and see what the night would bring. After dark, the sky continued to slowly worsen, with the large sucker holes closing up. Then the fog rolled in. By 11:00 PM, we had packed it in. Bob K and I decided to talk a walk down toward the end of the observing field, which was now covered in fog, to see what other folks were doing. As we walked along the taxi-way, we would occasionally spy a still active telescope with people clustered around it, trying to find something to observe in the few small clear spots overhead.

But then, rising up out of the mists on our left, there appeared the shape of a large refractor pointing towards the heavens! (a number of campers had arrived that evening, and we figured we had missed it being setup).

So we eagerly hurried over to it, wondering why no one else seemed to be around. Then we had a good laugh!!! As we got within a dozen feet of it, we realized that it wasn't a giant refractor, but the airfield's windsock!

The fog and darkness had fooled us! (Saturday evening, Denny and I strolled down to take a look at the great 'windfractor' and took this photo).

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-12.jpg>

Overnight, the rains came in, so Saturday morning wasn't as bright a day as Friday, with lots of scattered clouds and threatening weather!

But, it eventually dried off, the humidity stayed bearable, and there was enough sunshine to make for walking around, socializing, perusing the vendor merchandise, and chowing down at the picnic a pleasant experience.

Around 2:00 PM, a good thunderstorm did blow thru, but with plenty of warning, sending everyone to their cars to ride it out.

Then it cleared off, and started to look promising for the evening.

We were even feeling a bit lucky as the weather radio kept reporting severe storms passing to our north and south. At 5:00 PM, the raffle prize drawing began in the covered porch & pavilion that surrounds the campground pool, with the skies starting to ominously darken in the north-west. In a span of about 15 minutes, a severe thunderstorm barreled down on us, with numerous lightening strikes, small hail, and winds blowing the rain straight into the pavilion. There was no time to find better shelter, though a few foolish folks did run back up the hill to the campsites. For about a good 20 minutes, we were stuck in the thick of it, getting a bit damp! Finally, the storm let up, and the York folks continued the raffle. The Kiski club continued it's streak by winning several prizes, including the top prize bino viewer! Afterwards, we walked back up the hill to check our camp. Thanks to our noticing the coming storm and battening down the hatches prior to walking down to the raffle, we had little effects from the storm. But some of the other campers weren't so lucky, with a number of tents actually blowing down the hillside!

<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-08.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-09.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-10.jpg>
<http://home.comcast.net/~kiskiastronomers/images/conventions/MD2008-11.jpg>

Once the stragglng showers finally stopped, the skies began clearing around sunset. Those who hadn't left after the raffle and storm, and who still had a telescope setup, began uncovering them. With the fog already building, it was obvious that if you didn't have dew heaters, you wouldn't last long. And it was damp enough that everything quickly began dewing up! Denny and the Bob's decided to pass on getting their telescopes out, but as mine was already setup, I decided to give it a try. And by running the dew heaters flat out all night, I managed to keep the optics nice and dry for observing. (thanks to Denny for loaning me his battery pack - Mr Murphy had visited my main power supply and it was down). Other than the dew and ground fog, (which was worse than Friday nite), it actually became quite clear, with the Milky-Way visible. There were meteors and a nice pass of the ISS. The biggest highlight of the early evening was watching a huge storm cell pass to the far north, that had lots of cloud to cloud lightening between two separate thundercloud heads! After the storm passed, we got down to some serious observing!! All of the usual suspects (Messiers) were bright, with a number being visible to the naked eye. As foggy as it was on the ground, it didn't seem to extend more than 10 degrees up into the sky. We had a good time with the videoastronomy setup on the LX200. Toward the end of the evening, Denny and I were sitting outside my tent, doing some naked eye observing of the Milky-Way, with a line-of-sight into the tent, where the monitor displayed the current deep-sky object from the 8" LX200. I would occasionally reach over to the handbox remote and slew the telescope to something different. Those walking by were impressed! Finally, with the dampness and dropping temperature, Denny and I decided to call it a night around 1:00 AM. (The Bob's had turned in earlier), It was a great end to a hot and humid starparty convention!

Larry