

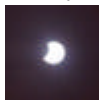


Snake River Skies

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A monthly publication of The Magic Valley Astronomical Society, member Astronomical League

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Jan 13th Meeting: Telescope Workshop-All you wanted to know...

The Magic Valley Astronomical Society will present a telescope workshop during our regular meeting Saturday, January 13, at the Herrett Center Classroom on the campus of the College of Southern Idaho starting at 7pm.

We will be demonstrating telescope techniques, how they are made, how to shop for one, how to maintenance your



telescope, and answer questions you may have about telescopes, perhaps assist you with the one you got for Christmas.

Join us afterwards for the monthly Herrett Center Star Party starting at 8:30pm.

From the President—Tom Gilbertson

Thanks to Jay Sneddon who put on another exciting trivia fun night for our December general meeting. Thanks also to all who attended and the number of generous sponsors who contributed to this event. Our board has met a couple of times since the fun night and has planned an exciting list of events.

telescope workshop. If you have a telescope that needs collimating or some adjustment be sure to bring it. There will be a number of scopes you can see and skilled observers to show how to properly use them.



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Yearly membership is \$10 per person, \$15 per family, \$6 per student. Benefits include magazine discounts to Sky & Telescope and Astronomy, club activities, and Astronomical League benefits.

Telescope Workshop

Be sure to come to our January 13 meeting and attend our first annual

Observing Awards

Also we will be presenting information on

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New class at CSI: Astronomy in Six Easy Lessons



This is a class offered through CSI's Continuing Education program. The class meets once a week for six weeks and starts February 26.

The cost is \$25.00 and you can sign up the night of the class or ahead of time at the

CSI administration building. Lessons include Myth and Constellations, The Allure of Astrology, How Telescopes Work, The Moon, Planets and Stars, and subject chosen by the class.

This class is meant for those interested in starting to learn the exciting science of Astronomy without the difficult math and tech talk.

Barnes & Noble Star Party Feb 3, 2001; St. Edwards Star Party Report

MVAS will be hosting a star party, Saturday February 3, 2001 at the Twin Falls Barnes & Noble. Please come out to assist the public in learning the stars. We will meet at B&N at 6pm.

On Sunday, January 7th, MVAS hosted a special youth star party for St. Edwards Catholic Church in Twin Falls. These 7th & 8th graders were given views of Venus, Jupiter, Saturn and the moon. Thanks to all MVASers who helped!

What Have You Seen Lately?

What have you seen lately?

Christmas 2000 was certainly memorable this year for featuring a partial solar eclipse visible from our part of the world. I was in Boise visiting my folks and was prepared for possible clear skies with my 3.5 inch Questar with solar filter. Just on time and with one of the clearest skies in a month the sun rose above the neighbor's house at about 8:35 a.m. There was a distinct dark dish bitten out of the upper limb of the sun. For the next two hours I periodically checked the progress of the Moon as its shadow increased to maximum (about 31% of the sun), receded, then finally left at about 10:30 am.

This new millennium starts out with some very impressive views of Venus, Moon, Saturn, and Jupiter. Venus is very bright right now and appears high in the southwestern sky. To the east and further north yellowish Saturn precedes the brighter Jupiter. The Moon has been making its rounds through this part of the sky the first part of this year. With all the planets and moon visible this is a great time to study the gentle curve of the ecliptic as it appears in the southwest and moves steadily to the northeast. While waiting for one of these views one night I saw the most

impressive moon rings I have ever seen. As a fog bank covered the early evening sky a growing gibbous moon glowed with a magical misty hue. A larger ring at least 10 degrees in radius filled the night sky.



Have you observed something in the night sky? Send us your observations.

— Tom Gilbertson

The Christmas Solar Eclipse

A few faithful gathered on Christmas morning to watch the solar eclipse from the Herrett Center. Thanks to Rick and Chris for sharing their Christmas with us!

All pictures courtesy of Forrest Ray.



NASA Revives Pluto Mission; 2004 Launch Possible

By Leonard David, Senior Science Writer, Space.com

WASHINGTON -- A mission to Pluto could launch as soon as 2004 and arrive eight years later under a NASA directive announced Wednesday that temporarily restores the agency's hope to explore the farthest and tiniest planet in our solar system before 2015.

NASA had ordered the Jet Propulsion Laboratory to stop working on the Pluto-Kuiper Express (PKE) mission this fall due to cost overruns. The mission had skyrocketed in price tag to \$800 million, double that of the projected cost two years ago. NASA's halting of work on the mission drew protests from the space science community.

Complex situation

"This is a complex situation," said Edward Weiler, NASA associate administrator for the Office of Space Science. The space agency will issue a mid-January "announcement of opportunity" for "the best minds in the country" to come up with alternative plans for a mission to Pluto that could fit within NASA's budget, he said.

Scientists with NASA's Solar System Exploration Subcommittee, an advisory group to the space agency, told Weiler they could accept a small slip in dispatching a mission to Jupiter's moon Europa in 2008, to fit in a Pluto mission within NASA's outer planets program. However, a slip to 2011 is not acceptable for the Europa mission, he said.

"We are trying to get them both launched in this decade.

That's the goal," Weiler said.

The opportunity to use Jupiter as a gravity assist to reach Pluto necessitates a spacecraft launch in 2004 or 2006, at the latest. "This is likely the last chance to get to Pluto for a decade or more," Weiler said.

"We are not making a commitment to do a Pluto mission or to select any of the proposals," Weiler stressed. "We just want to see if we have any viable options," he said. NASA will cap the cost of the Pluto mission at \$500 million, in fiscal year 2000 dollars.

"I don't want to get a Pluto mission that is 'unobtainium.' That would automatically push Europa out," Weiler said. "There is no room for mistakes. I don't want over promising and underbidding. I don't want people to promise me things they can't deliver," he told *SPACE.com*.

Freeze out

By launching a probe to Pluto no later than 2006, scientists could reach the planet before its thin atmosphere collapses in 2020 -- a cycle that occurs every time Pluto's elliptical orbit starts tracking toward its farthest distance from the Sun.

"There is general agreement in the science community that the atmosphere will freeze out. There are honest differences of opinion about how fast and how completely," said Jay Bergstralh, NASA's acting director of solar system exploration.

"As time goes on, over the next decade or two, what remains of the Pluto's atmosphere will be more and more tenuous as the planet recedes from the Sun," Bergstralh said. The study of Pluto's atmosphere is considered key to understanding the tiny planet. Pluto revolves around the Sun in an elliptical path. It passed through its perihelion -- the closest point to the Sun during an orbit -- a decade ago.

As Pluto moves farther from the Sun it will cool, and its tenuous atmosphere -- with a surface pressure just a few millionths that of Earth -- will begin to freeze. That atmosphere is expected to freeze out completely within the next two decades, depriving scientists of a chance to study it for more than two centuries. Pluto completes its orbit around the Sun every 248 years.

Cast the net widely

The Pluto mission is bundled with the Europa Orbiter mission under NASA's Outer Planets Program.

Weiler also announced that a NASA workshop will be held in early February to stimulate new ideas for outer planet exploration, including possible reshaping of the Europa orbiter mission.

"We want to cast the net widely to formulate a real outer planets program that includes more than two missions over a decade-and-a-half," Weiler said.

Pluto is the only planet in our solar system unvisited by a spacecraft. Some scientists have opposed giving priority to the Pluto mission, saying the Europa mission deserves immediate attention.

"Europa may harbor the only ocean in the solar system, other than on Earth. If you have water, energy, and hydrocarbons, you have life," Weiler said. "Europa is a very, very important mission."

Weiler said that due to intense radiation at Europa, sending a spacecraft to that Jovian moon is challenging. The Pluto mission is simpler to do than sending a probe to Europa, he said. "Europa is not a place you want to send grandma. It's a tough place to go to," Weiler said. Weiler encouraged mission planners to consider using novel propulsion methods for arriving quickly at Pluto, such as ion propulsion.





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Message from the President *cont*

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the many observing awards offered in conjunction with the Astronomical League. This is an area we plan to push this year with our dark sky observing nights. Be sure to bone up for the special Messier Marathon we will be conducting in the later part of March. Our February meeting will be a review of the Messier objects, detailing what they are and when to best view them.

Membership Drive

If you have not renewed your membership for the coming year, please be sure to complete and send in the enclosed form with your dues. If you have paid your 2001 dues give this form to a friend. We had a good increase in membership last year and the extra funds we receive go to help us fund our newsletter, build or acquire loaner scopes, and other worthwhile projects.

Thanks for your interest in Astronomy and being part of our club.

Tom Gilbertson, President

MVAS CLUB CALENDAR

NEXT CLUB MEETING:

Saturday **January 13th** 7pm Herrett Center Classroom. We will be hosting a telescope workshop. Bring your own telescope if you have one or learn from one of ours! We will cover how telescopes work, how to maintain them and how to shop for one. See you there!

Public Star Party Saturday **February 3rd**, 6pm, Barnes & Noble. MVAS will be making a presentation then hosting a star party. Come out and lend us a hand to introduce the stars to Barnes & Noble customers.

Saturday **February 10th** 7pm Herrett Center Classroom. Messier Objects, what they are, how to find them. This will be in preparation for March's Messier Marathon.

The Magic Valley Astronomical Society meets the second Saturday of each month at the College of Southern Idaho, Herrett Center Classroom at 7pm. Star Party at the Herrett Center follows.

Visit us at <http://www.mvas.net>

Please submit web site materials to mvas@mvas.net We welcome photos and other materials to post.