

September 2002

Snake River Skies

Magic Valley Astronomical Society

Volume 3, Issue 9

Next MVAS Meeting: The Discoveries of Neptune

Our next Magic Valley Astronomical Meeting will take place Saturday September 14th, 7pm, at the Herrett Center's Frost Classroom. Our club President, Jay Sneddon, will present "The Discoveries of Neptune", featuring the controversy surrounding two very different scientists who laid claim as Neptune's discoverers.

Neptune was the first planet ever discovered mathematically before actually being observed. An English mathematician, John Couch Adams, and a temperamental Frenchman, Urbain LaVerier, independ-



ently calculated where Neptune's position should be. Problem was, they couldn't find someone to point a telescope at the location.



A star party follows at dusk at the Herrett Center. We hope to see you there!

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September Sky Highlights *courtesy Astronomy.com*

Planets

Venus is nearing the end of its reign as the "evening star," though it will reach its greatest brightness during the last days of September. Appearing low in the west-southwest as the sky darkens for viewers in the Northern Hemisphere, Venus will easily pierce the murky sky near the horizon if it is not blocked by buildings or trees. It will set less than two hours after the sun at the beginning of the month and only an hour after the sun by month's end. The situation will be the opposite for those watching in the Southern Hemisphere, as Venus will appear high in the western sky even before sunset. Venus will cross into the morning sky during October.

As seen from the Northern Hemisphere, Mercury will be barely above the western horizon a half hour after sunset during September, far to the lower right (north)

of Venus. Without a telescope, Mercury will probably be too difficult to find in the bright evening twilight during the short time before it sets. For observers in the Southern Hemisphere, Mercury will be farther above the horizon as the evening sky darkens but fading rapidly as the days pass. By the final week of the month, Mercury will be lost in the solar glare as it crosses between Earth and the sun.

Saturn will rise in the east-northeast within an hour after midnight local time at the beginning of September and two hours earlier by month's end, remaining visible for the rest of the night in the constellation Orion the Hunter. The yellow planet will be highest in the south just before morning twilight, the best time for viewing its famous rings with a telescope.

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Yearly membership is \$20 per person, \$20 per family \$10 per student, Sponsor \$100

Idaho Star Party 2002 by Tom Gilbertson

A solid mass of clouds clouded out the Idaho skies Friday night and with intermittent rain showers on Saturday there seemed to be little hope we would have much sky viewing opportunities at the Idaho Star Party at the Bruneau Sand Dunes State Park this year. More bad news, a call from the caterer for the evening banquet said he would not be able to make the event because he was stuck in traffic behind an accident that closed the freeway. Resourceful Officers of the Boise Astronomical Society quickly ordered 20 pizzas from a startled Pizza Hut employee in Mountain Home, the raffle was conducted, and miraculously the fickle Idaho skies cleared.



Speakers Steve O'Meara and Misty Bentz gave very informative talks while people waited out the clouds.

The rain had cleared the skies of dust making the skies the most pristine we have seen all year. There were a number of impressive scopes at the

event and the oos and aas from the viewers testified to the magic of the late summer wonders that became visible.

I had the good fortune of manning the observatory 25" reflector and was able to see the always showey M13, some other globulars and of course one of my favorites, the Vail Nebula. Nothing I saw, however, rivaled the spectacular view of the sometimes hard to find Swan Nebula. With the observatory 2" 17mm eyepiece coupled with their O2 Nebula filter I had the best view of this object I have ever seen. A large very distinct Swan like figure swimming in a pitch black sea emerged from the eyepiece.

Balloon pioneer Paul Verhage came in at about midnight to report his last balloon had landed high up in a 30' pine tree. I offered my chain saw, but Paul declined thinking the Forest Service might frown on sawing down a tree for a balloon package.

Congratulations to BAS President Bob Schneider, the Boise Astronomical Society, and Park Ranger Kurt Zwolfer, and the many other volunteers who helped make this a highly successful event. Mark your calendars for September 2003, because the Idaho Star Party is not something you want to miss next year.

Saving Dark Skies in Texas—A Success Story *from Sky and Telescope*

September 3, 2002 | In the ongoing struggle between expanding development and the protection of vanishing dark skies, it looks like there's a success story in the making outside Houston — and possibly an example for other areas facing similar threats.

The [George Observatory](#), run by the [Houston Museum of Natural Science](#) and located about 50 miles from the city, draws about 30,000 visitors every year for school field trips, public observing sessions, and an active research program by students and amateur astronomers using its 36-inch reflector. The site is close enough to the city to serve a large number of visitors, explains observatory director Betty Glass, but far enough away to have reasonably dark skies — though that is changing fast as the city expands.

But a bigger danger than the gradual sprawl of development appeared to be looming this summer: An unidentified developer is planning to build a large new NASCAR auto racetrack less than 15 miles away, with the potential for bright lights on the Friday and



Thanks to some diplomatic efforts by amateur astronomers, the skies above George Observatory, outside Houston, Texas, may be saved from additional light pollution. *Courtesy Charles Gray.*

Saturday evenings when most visitors use the observa-

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Hubble Views a Ring Galaxy *from Sky and Telescope*

September 5, 2002 | Discovered by astronomer Art Hoag in 1950, this unusual galaxy in the constellation Serpens goes by the moniker Hoag's Object. As revealed in this striking view from the Hubble Space Telescope, it consists of a nearly perfect ring of young blue stars circling a nucleus of older yellow ones. This bizarre geometry, which has been observed in a handful of other galaxies too, probably resulted from an interaction with a second galaxy. The burst of star formation now taking place in the ring was presumably triggered by the collision.



Coincidentally, another ring galaxy — apparently far in the background — is visible between the nucleus and ring of Hoag's Object at about the 1 o'clock position. Several other remote galaxies are sprinkled around the image too; these all look like normal spirals and ellipticals.

Saving an Observatory *from Sky and Telescope*

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tory.

Alerted by a call from *Sky & Telescope*, the local [Fort Bend Astronomy Club](#) and its dark-sky committee sprang into action. After determining that Morris Architects in Houston was handling the racetrack plans, Glass contacted the architect there who is designing the project.

As luck would have it, the architect had visited the George Observatory himself and was eager to cooperate to minimize the racetrack's impact on the skies. "The developer wants to be a good neighbor," Glass says. "He said they would definitely consider shielded lighting." The architect suggested the group contact them in December, when the project should be getting to the stage of lighting design. Though the exact location has not been made public, the architect confirmed its proximity to the observatory.

As presently planned, Glass says, "there will be only a few events a year where they would have big lights." Glass says she will urge the racetrack to turn off those lights as soon as possible after events end.

Jack McKaye, vice-president of the Fort Bend club, feels that this whole episode has helped to revitalize the group's efforts to combat light pollution after several failed attempts to work with poorly lit shopping centers. "It's been a long row to hoe," he says, "just trying to get people to believe that they're saving money and being responsible by shining their lights on the ground."

The group has had some previous success, last year getting the route changed for a new parkway near the observatory, and getting a nearby McDonald's to shield its lights, McKaye says. But, "after getting slapped down as regularly as we had," the initial promising response on this new project "kind of rejuvenated a lot of people."

Before she talked to the architect, "I was out looking at the Milky Way, and I was thinking, I hope it's here next summer," Glass says. If the racetrack developers are really as cooperative as they seem so far, it looks like that's a good bet.

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What is up in the sky in September

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Brilliant white Jupiter will rise three hours after Saturn in the constellation Cancer the Crab. For the first two weeks of September, binoculars will reveal a pretty sight as Jupiter passes just below the Beehive Star Cluster.

Mars will be out of sight behind the sun for the next few months.

Equinox

The sun will reach the September equinox on Sept. 22 at 11:55 p.m. CDT (Sept. 23 at 5:55 Universal Time), marking the start of fall in the Northern Hemisphere and spring in the Southern Hemisphere. For the next six months in the Northern Hemisphere, the nights will be longer than the days.

Harvest Moon

The Harvest Moon is the full moon closest to the September equinox, and this year they almost coincide. For several nights in a row around Sept. 21 in the Northern Hemisphere, the nearly-full moon will rise soon after dusk and seem to linger near the horizon for a while, colored yellow-orange by dust particles and other debris in the lower atmosphere, before it rises higher into the sky and turns its usual brilliant white.

Moon phases

The moon will be new on Sept. 6, at first quarter on Sept. 13, full (the Harvest Moon) on Sept. 21 and at third quarter on Sept. 29.