

REFLECTIONS / REFRACTIONS

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University Lowbrow
Astronomers

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Why Go to a Star Party?

by Doug Scobel

That's a question I've heard more than once. The suggested reasoning is why drive all day (or longer) and many hundreds of miles away to observe under dark skies when we have just as dark if not darker skies within our own state borders, even in Michigan's lower peninsula? Now if you go to a star party just for the observing then I would be inclined to agree – you might as well stay in our own Michigan “backyard” and save a lot of time and money spent on gasoline. But for me there's far more than just dark skies that make star parties an irresistible draw.

Where else can you party with hundreds of your closest friends? For the past several years, ever since Bobby and Joni first attended it in the year 2000, several of us have been making the trek to the annual Black Forest Star Party. The Black Forest Star Party is held at Cherry Springs State Park, in Potter County, Pennsylvania. It's in a remote area north of Penn State University, in the Allegheny Mountains not far from the New York border. It's about a 400-mile drive from Ann Arbor that can be comfortably done in about eight hours or so. It is usually held late August or early September, depending on the weekend closest to new moon. Attendance is restricted to 450-475 registrants. And guess what – just about every one of them is just as obsessed with astronomy as you are! You instantly have something in common. Moreover, there are telescopes galore, many commercially made, others home made. Have a question about one? I have never seen a scope owner who doesn't like talking about one of his or her most prized possessions.



Camp Lowbrow at the 2006 Black Forest Star Party. Unless otherwise noted all photos are by the author.

The same can be said about other star parties I've attended. In 1998, I went to the Texas Star Party, held at The Prude Ranch in Fort Davis, Texas, and last fall I attended the Okie-Tex Star Party, at Camp Billie-Joe, in Kenton, Oklahoma. Besides attracting hundreds of attendees, at these major events you may meet some folks you're not too likely to meet otherwise. Like at Texas Star Party I was observing two scopes down from famed astrophotographers Tony and Daphne Hallas. At Okie-Tex last year, we met renowned visual observer Barbara Wilson, and we were camped right next to Jim Lawrence, a guy who has forgotten more about making binocular telescopes than the rest of us could ever hope to know. The view through his 12.5-inch binoculars was astounding!



Jim Lawrence and his 12.5-inch binoculars at the 2007 Okie-Tex Star Party

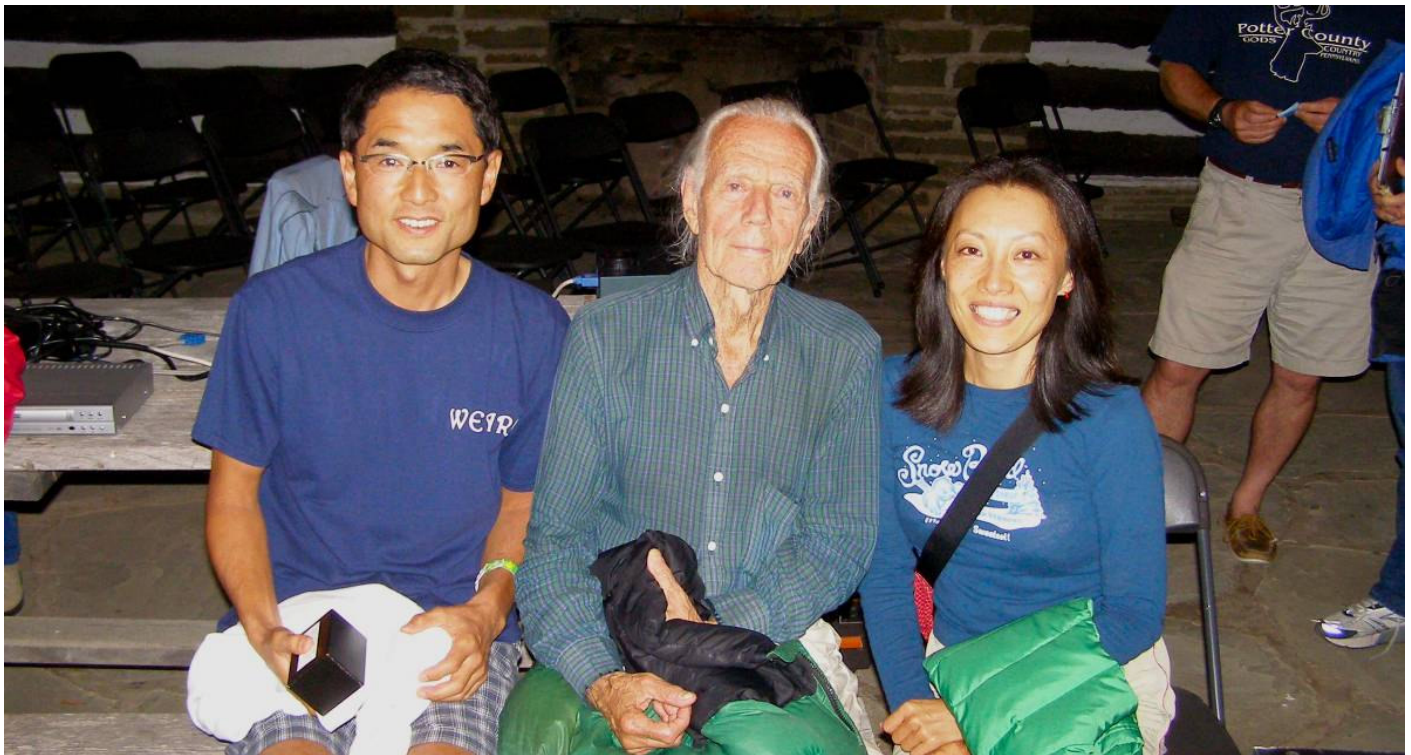
Need a new eyepiece or accessory? Most star parties attract commercial vendors who sell everything from eyepiece caps to knit observing hats; surplus optics to the latest, hottest 100 degree eyepiece; used telescope parts to brand new, entire telescopes; red flashlights, laser pointers, books, observing chairs, shirts, virtually anything an amateur astronomer needs (or simply wants). Much of the time the sellers provide star party discounts that you can't get otherwise, plus you don't have to pay for shipping. Some telescope makers even deliver their finished scopes to their customers at star parties so that they can make several deliveries in one trip. I can't think of any local observing sites where the vendors come to you.



On his seventh trip to the vendors' tents Chris wonders why he doesn't have any money left

What do you do when the munchies hit at midnight and you need something substantial to keep you observing until dawn? Most star parties provide food well into the night, offering everything from burgers to coffee. At the Black Forest Star Party there's the Incredible Edibles trailer that you can visit when you need a substantial snack and a caffeine fix to keep you going. At the Okie-Tex Star Party they have the Cosmic Café, which provides an impressive menu, plus a place to warm up. In addition, many star parties, such as Astrofest, Okie-Tex, and the Texas Star Party, offer catered meals you can pay for in advance so that you don't have to live on camp food you bring yourself, which has the added benefit of freeing up cargo space for that new scope you'll be bringing back home with you.

Looking for things to do during the day (if you don't need to sleep after being up all night)? Most star parties schedule daytime talks during the actual event. This year at the Black Forest the keynote speaker was John Dobson, the namesake of the Dobsonian telescope mounting that revolutionized amateur telescope design about thirty years ago. At the 2006 Black Forest Star Party, Sue French gave a really nice talk on observing open star clusters. Or sometimes talks are presented by folks we know a little better, such as our own Mark Deprest. Most of the talks are educational and entertaining, and there's usually something for everyone. (Hey, Mark, do I get any newsletter article credits for including your name?)



Yasu and Yumi with John Dobson at the 2008 Black Forest Star Party. Photo courtesy Yasu Inugi.

In addition, most of the time there are interesting nearby attractions that you can visit by day. The Black Forest Star Party is close to the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania, an 800-foot deep, forested canyon carved out by the Pine Creek. At this year's Black Forest Star Party Mike Radwick and yours truly hiked down to the bottom and back. Okie-Tex has nearby Black Mesa, Capulin Volcano, and the Picture Canyon. The Texas Star Party's venue is not far from McDonald Observatory, home of the University of Texas's 82-inch, 107-inch, and 9.2-meter telescopes. The Texas Star Party organizers arrange for bus tours of the observatory from the ranch. Attending these and other star parties gives you opportunities to visit places you simply wouldn't go to otherwise.



Left to right: Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania; Capulin Volcano, New Mexico; McDonald Observatory, Fort Davis, Texas

Where else can you get something for (almost) nothing? Most star parties issue each registered attendee a ticket to allow him or her to participate in a door prize drawing. Vendors will donate everything from astronomical prints to premium eyepieces to whole telescopes, and your registration fee buys you a chance to win one of these items. Often there are dozens of prizes given out. Black Forest takes it a step farther with what is called a Chinese raffle, where each prize has its own coffee can into which participants place their ticket. Attendees can then buy as many tickets as they wish, and choose only those prizes they want to take a chance on winning. Most every year at least one Lowbrow wins something, and some years we have multiple winners.

Want to really have some fun? Hope for a cloudy night or two. Seriously. If you only go to more-or-less local observing sites, then if bad weather strikes you are more than likely going to opt to stay home. But if you've already paid your money, and there's a speaker you really want to listen to, or there's a vendor you just have to visit, then you're more likely to attend should the weather be iffy. And if the weather ends up being inclement then it forces you to interact with your fellow attendees. Who can forget the great time we had during the Invasion of the Lowbrows at the 2006 Black Forest Star Party? The star party was pretty much a wash-out. But we set up Scopehenge, observed Messiers through the keyholes in the clouds, traded stories, feasted on Jambalaya, and generally had a blast. We probably had more fun as a group at that star party than we ever did during those years when we had mostly clear nights.



Scopehenge and the Invasion of the Lowbrows at the 2006 Black Forest Star Party

This year's Black Forest Star Party was kind of a mix weather-wise. Tuesday and Wednesday nights were clear, but Thursday was hazy, and Friday was lousy (we woke up to rain Saturday morning). We did some keyhole observing Thursday night but we had to get creative Friday night. As luck would have it, Yasu brought a dome-shaped camping shelter and his portable planetarium. So he gave us an excellent planetarium show – of both the northern and southern hemispheres! Plus we had some fun writing out some greetings for the rest of the folks back in Michigan. Again, we had a great time. If we had planned a weekend trip up north with similar weather, we would most likely have canceled and missed out.



Joni is beside herself wondering if the clouds will give way to stars at the 2008 Black Forest Star Party

Of course it wouldn't be a star party if you didn't spend time under the stars. Most of the time the well known star parties are held at observing sites with superbly dark skies when it is clear. Of the star parties I've been to, Okie-Tex skies are about as dark as you can get in the continental U.S., with the Texas Star Party being a close second. Cherry Springs skies may be slightly inferior to those in the northeast Lower Peninsula, but I can tell you that the best view I have ever had of M42, the Great Nebula in Orion, was on a particularly pristine night during the 2005 Black Forest event. The skies there are certainly excellent.



Photos taken from the 2007 Okie-Tex Star Party. Left to right: Milky Way Aquila to Sagittarius; the Pleiades; Orion

So why go to a star party? For me it's a no-brainer, which suits me just fine. As for the rest of you who haven't been to one, or haven't in a long time – what are you waiting for? Get out there and join the fun! I guarantee you won't regret it.

One Night at Tomahawk Creek

By Mark Deprest

August 29, 2008, 16:00: Work is done for the next 3 days. It's Labor Day Weekend and all indications are that it is going to be a perfect weather weekend here in Michigan. I had made plans to go up to Tomahawk Creek State Forest Campgrounds on Saturday for a night of "Dark Site Astronomy." Since I was not going to be able to go the Black Forest Star Party this year and the Green Bank Star Quest was not that great this year. I thought a night at a "really dark" site would be the ticket.

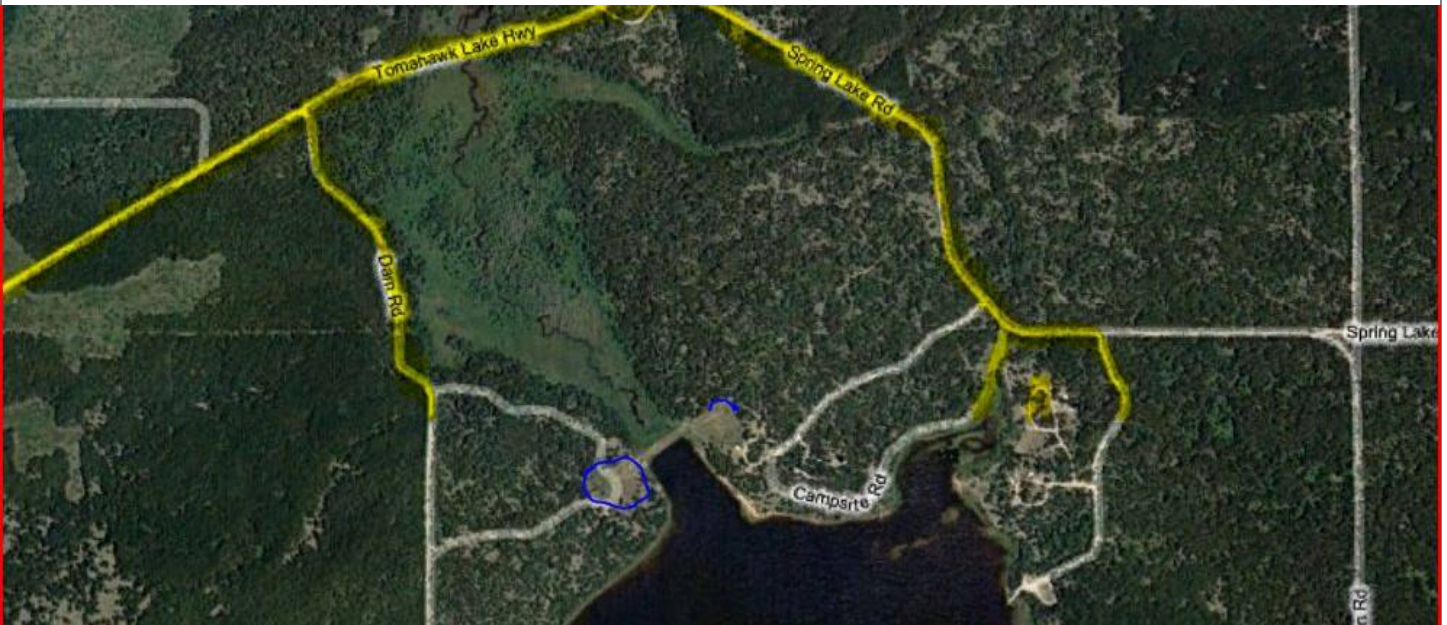
Saturday, August 30, 2008, 09:00 - 10:00: I had breakfast with my wife, and then finished loading up my SUV. I was only going up for the one night as personal commitments at home prevented me from staying any longer. A quick check of the weather showed that I was in for ideal conditions; clear skies, low humidity and no wind. The jet stream was well north of Tomahawk Creek, which would mean very steady skies, and the low humidity would make for good transparency. I had prepared an observing list of 20 Arp galaxies and a couple of charts for 2 comets. I was bringing my laptop, an Arp Galaxies Observer's guide, Uranometria 2000.0 (3 volume set) and the rest of my sky charts. I had my tent, cot, sleeping-bag, and camp chair all tossed in the SUV. I brought my 12.5" f/5.6 truss tube dob (Big Red), Johnsonian tracking platform, Catsperch observing chair, and my roll-top equipment / chart table. I had a change of clothes, some cold weather gear and a cooler of soft drinks, water, sandwiches and fried chicken. Just the bare essentials were packed neatly in my Saturn Vue.



Tomahawk Creek Flooding State Forest Campground is located just east off M-33 about 12 miles south of Onaway, MI. The campgrounds themselves are in three different locations and offer only the rustic camping. Only vault toilets, and potable water, no showers or electricity, so don't forget to charge your batteries. The west campgrounds are located off Dam Rd. and are heavily wooded sites. The north campgrounds are currently closed for renovations and construction of additional sites and accessed from Spring Lake Rd. to Campsite Rd. and the sites are lightly wooded with a couple of sites that back up to a large open field. However, this open field slopes fairly sharply down to the eastern side of the dam. The east campgrounds are a little more open than the north sites and you access these sites from Spring Lake Rd. A couple of sites are very clear with three out of four horizons clear down to 10 degrees with the fourth horizon clear down to 30 degrees. There is a little issue with any of these sites, in that you could have neighbors who like big campfires or use very bright lanterns. Most of these issues can be resolved with a polite plea to shield the stay light and / or and invite to look through your scope.

There is one last area that works great for astronomy enthusiasts and it ended up being the place where I set up my camp site. Though it was not an officially designated site, it was perfect for my purposes. A large open field about 75 yards by 75 yards bordered by 15 – 20 foot tall trees with ample room for tents and scopes. The shorter trees border the northwest to southwest edges of the field, with the lake, dam and creek around the rest of the field, gives you all horizons down to 5 degrees or better. To get to this area you need to take a “two track” road east off of Dam Rd., it was probably an access road to service the dam. The road ends with a large “turn-around” and parking area (room for 5 cars to park) at the western edge of the field. There is a log barrier about 2 feet tall that prohibits driving onto the dam and field, but foot access and 2 wheel dollies to bring your equipment and camping supplies is easy.

Yasu and Yumi Inugi found Tomahawk Creek last year and raved about it, John Causland has been there also and wrote an article that mentions the wonderfully dark skies above. I went there expecting to be “WOWWED” by the skies and let me tell you, I wasn’t disappointed! The campgrounds are only 230 miles north of Ann Arbor or 3.5 hours averaging 65 mph and have some of the darkest skies I’ve ever had the pleasure to observe in. Tomahawk Creek is slightly darker than Cherry Springs State Park, PA (home of the Black Forest Star Party), they are much darker than River Valley RV Park just outside of Gladwin, MI (home of the Great Lakes Star Gaze), but not quite as dark as Camp Billie Joe in Kenton, OK (home of the Okie-Tex Star Party).



I highly recommend checking this place out, as I experienced one of the best observing sessions of my life! I was able to see details in almost ever object I put into the eyepiece that I never expected to see. Arp Peculiar Galaxies are notoriously comprised of extremely faint and subtle details like outer rings, disconnected arms, and bridges of very low surface brightness. These faint and fine details were (in almost every case) visible under the conditions and dark skies of Tomahawk Creek. I completed my list of 20 Arps and 2 comets and started chewing up some “eye candy”! I was able to see M33 easily “naked-eye” and the North American Nebula with a 2” UHC filter held in front of my eye. Multiple dark lanes in M31 and spiral structure in M110 that rivals M33, the Veil Nebula was enough to blow away even the most seasoned of observer, with Pickering’s triangle being as bright and detailed as I have ever seen. I was out until 3:00 am and was totally satisfied that I had done what I came here to do. I had expected to be pretty well soaked with dew being as close as I was to a large body of water, but surprisingly enough most of my equipment was dry or only a little damp. As I took the next 25 minutes or so to wipe off and pack away my equipment, I thought about staying one more night but I had commitments at home and there will be other chances to come and stay longer.

I have included a satellite picture of the area at the end of this article and added some labels so that you better understand the description of the area.

Bottom line: Watch the weather and if you see a weekend during the dark of the moon, pack up you car and head to Tomahawk Creek ... you won’t regret it!

You're Welcome! & Thank You!

Sometimes you get emails that just need to be shared! These are the reasons I like doing "Out-reach Astronomy", everyone likes to know they made an impact!

Here are some of the emails that I've received recently and I thought that it might be fun to share them with the rest of the club. Liz Calhoun is one of our newest members and Bill McLean and his son camped next to Yasu, Yumi and me at the 2008 Greenbank Star Quest.

September 21, 2008

Dear Mark,

Thank you so much for a wonderful presentation! This meeting was my first as a Lowbrow and it was absolutely splendid. I had to leave a little before the end of the business meeting (my fault: next time I'll park closer and not have to take the Commuter bus to a deserted Crisler Arena parking lot). I showed my housemate what Slooh was all about Saturday, and we also went out of our way to learn about the "Ghost of Jupiter," something I'd never heard of!

I joined the Lowbrows so I could learn from other "amateurs" like me about our Universe. Your enthusiasm that of the whole gathering, is contagious. And several people introduced themselves to me and made me feel at home, especially President Nielsen.

I'm glad you shared around your results -- it gave me a chance to reply and thank you.

Clear skies,

Liz Calhoun

September 2, 2008

Hello Mark,

I hope this finds you well. Even though we had only one clear night that Star quest at Greenbank was a major hoot! What a great thing it was- my son turning on to astronomy.

I owe you big thanks for taking the time with me and turning me on to those Messier finder guides. I have gotten quite proficient in finding objects- at least the Messier catalogue. I've logged 45+/- so far. If the constellation is up I can more than likely find the object- and that feels good. I'm starting to branch out to NGCs and etc. I was out last night, about 40 miles north of Norfolk, on the Eastern Shore of VA. Quite dark and I was in heaven.

Last week I was in central NY. Even darker and I got in 3 good nights and one so-so night and was able to show family and friends some heavenly bodies- and now I can find 'em and show folks where they are. They think I'm some sort of genius- they haven't met the likes of folks like you!

All my best,

Bill McLean

September 3, 2008

Bill,

It's very nice to hear from you and I am very happy to hear of your continued success and proficiency. Your kind words and praise are accepted with all due humility! I only did for you, that which was done for me many years ago. Your enthusiasm and tenacity is what is the most refreshing. I am very happy to hear that you using your new skills to share with others. With your permission I like to share your letter with my club in our newsletter (I will forward you a copy). I promise to stay in touch with you, if you'll do the same with me. If you join a club that is a member of the Astronomical League and you log your Messier observations, when you've completed all 110 Messier objects you are eligible for a certificate and pin. (kinda cool). Keep me Posted and I'll do the same!

Carpe Noctem - Clear Skies & Dark Nights

Mark S Deprest

September 4, 2008

Hi Mark,

As for me I am a member of the Back Bay [Amateur Astronomers](#), and I am working on the pin. I'm also looking at the Lunar pin for when it's super clear and the moon is out and I won't have to feel so bad.

I have moved up to a 10" dob. It's as large and heavy as I care to handle and fits in my car (and Orion dropped the price). I noticed a difference in especially contrast when I first used it. I'm able to find things easier. Last night I was using the 8" (getting it ready to sell) and wow! It's like looking at a 4 watt night light! I could really see the difference that those 2 inches in diameter let in.

Now we're getting ready for the hurricane Hanna that's predicted to hit here Saturday. Yea! Maybe we won't have a lot of damage and the power will be out in the area and all the dang blasted lights will be out. It's usually VERY clear after a hurricane. Talk about a silver lining!

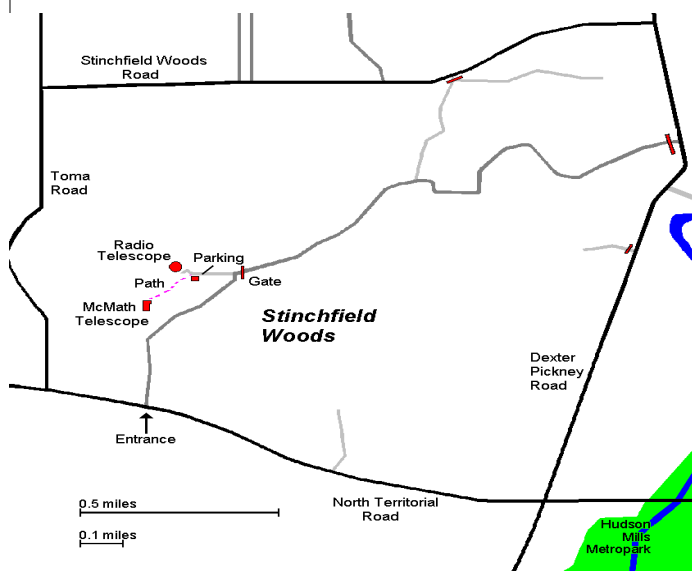
Yours

Bill McLean

Places & Times

Dennison Hall, also known as The University of Michigan's Physics & Astronomy building, is the site of the monthly meeting of the University Lowbrow Astronomers. Dennison Hall can be found on Church Street about one block north of South University Avenue in Ann Arbor, MI. The meetings are usually held in room 130, and on the 3rd Friday of each month at 7:30 pm. During the summer months and when weather permits, a club observing session at the Peach Mountain Observatory will follow the meeting.

Peach Mountain Observatory is the home of the University of Michigan's 25 meter radio telescope as well as the University's McMath 24" telescope which is maintained and operated by the Lowbrows. The observatory is located northwest of Dexter, MI; the entrance is on North Territorial Rd. 1.1 miles west of Dexter-Pinckney Rd. A small maize & blue sign on the north side of the road marks the gate. Follow the gravel road to the top of the hill and a parking area near the radio telescopes, then walk along the path between the two fenced in areas (about 300 feet) to reach the McMath telescope building.



Public Open House / Star Parties

Public Open Houses / Star Parties are generally held on the Saturdays before and after the New Moon at the Peach Mountain observatory, but are usually cancelled if the sky is cloudy at sunset or the temperature is below 10 degrees F. For the most up to date info on the Open House / Star Party status call: (734)332-9132. Many members bring their telescope to share with the public and visitors are welcome to do the same. Peach Mountain is home to millions of hungry mosquitoes, so apply bug repellent, and it can get rather cold at night, please dress accordingly.



Membership

Membership dues in the University Lowbrow Astronomers are \$20 per year for individuals or families, \$12 per year for students and seniors (age 55+) and \$5 if you live outside of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

This entitles you to the access to our monthly Newsletters on-line at our website and use of the 24" McMath telescope (after some training).

A hard copy of the Newsletter can be obtained with an additional \$12 annual fee to cover printing and postage. Dues can be paid at the monthly meetings or by check made out to University Lowbrow Astronomers and mailed to:

The University Lowbrow Astronomer c/o Yasuharu Inugi

**2918 W Clark Rd #203
Ypsilanti, MI 48197**

Membership in the Lowbrows can also get you a discount on these magazine subscriptions:

Sky & Telescope - \$32.95 / year

Astronomy - \$34.00 / year or \$60.00 for 2 years

For more information contact the club Treasurer. Members renewing their subscriptions are reminded to provide the renewal notice along with your check to the club Treasurer. Please make your check out to: "University Lowbrow Astronomers"

Newsletter Contributions

Members and (non-members) are encouraged to write about any astronomy related topic of interest.

Call or Email the Newsletter Editor: **Mark S Deprest (734)223-0262 or msdeprest@comcast.net** to discuss length and format. Announcements, articles and images are due by the 1st day of the month as publication is the 7th.

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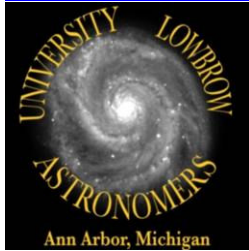


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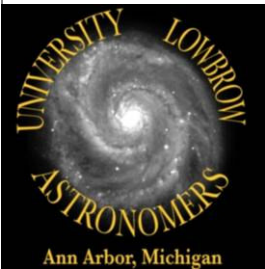
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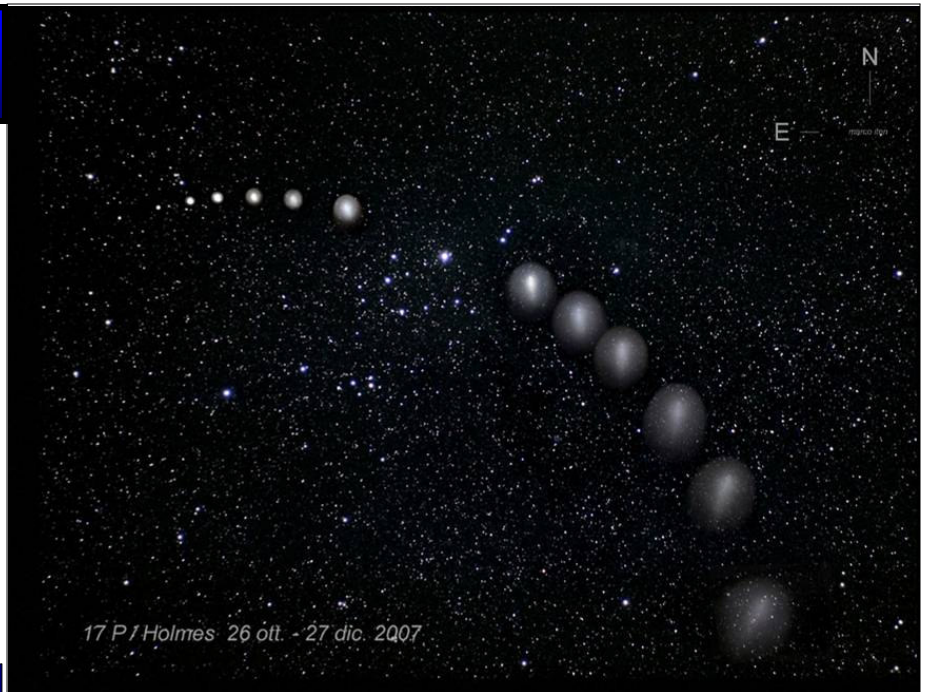


Website

www.umich.edu/~lowbrows/



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17 P/Holmes 26 ött. - 27 dic. 2007

Last year at this time all the talk in the comet and astronomy community!

Check your membership expiration date on the mailing label