

Star Struck

Nighttime skies stir wonder across the Commonwealth

By JACKIE HOLLENKAMP BENTLEY

“Astronomy compels the soul to look upwards and leads us from this world to another.” — Plato (427-347 B.C.)

Many in Kentucky have been compelled to look upward at night, marvel at the sights and share that sense of wonder. Astronomy clubs can be found within driving distance of any of the Commonwealth’s borders, offering knowledge of the stars and sharing the science with anyone who expresses interest.

One of the oldest clubs in the United States is the Louisville Astronomical Society (LAS). Created in 1933 by University of Louisville professor Walter Lee Moore, the organization is charged with bringing knowledge of the stars to the public any chance it gets. “We teach ourselves astronomy so we can share it with other people,” said Ken Alderson, LAS president. “We bring it down to the level of a sixth-grade student so everybody can understand it. We’ve got technology here that we can take people right out to the planets.”

Alderson said the society gives stargazers plenty of venues from which to study the night sky, including the LAS Urban Astronomy Center at E.P. “Tom” Sawyer State Park, the LAS Observing Site in Kirby, Ind., and regular meetings

at UofL. But perhaps the best-known get-togethers are the so-called sidewalk astronomy events. “This past year (2011) we had 104 sidewalk astronomy events and programs,” he said. “We also host monthly star parties in Kirby. At the same time, you’ll find us at Blackacre Nature Preserve, Bernheim Forest and Kentucky state parks. We go all over the state.”

But the LAS isn’t the only astronomy group in the Commonwealth. Rick Schrantz, the president of the Bluegrass Amateur Astronomy Club (BAAC), said the club members take out their telescopes and share their passion with people living in and around the Lexington area. “We

like to show people things through telescopes. When we show them, we like to explain what they’re seeing,” Schrantz said. “You start to talk about the universe and concepts ... kids like to see that and adults do, too.”

Countless children have taken that curiosity and developed it into a passion that spills over into their adult life—even so far as to build a personal observatory in their own backyard, as Fred Calvert of Cold Spring has done. “I have been interested in astronomy and aviation ever since I was in elementary school. I guess 9 years old,” Calvert

said. “I went to the school library and got books on stars and planets.”

That interest turned into a career—first in photography and then in aviation mechanics—all the while flying private



Comet 17P/Holmes

"What is great about astronomy is that everything is so perfect in the skies."



Cold Spring Observatory



Fred Calvert

planes for more than three decades. Then, nine years ago, after dealing with northern Kentucky's unpredictable and humid nights, Calvert decided to build his own observatory in his backyard. "People get very frustrated with doing astronomy, especially around here," he said. "You take a telescope outside at night, and the temperature changes. So you dry it off and take it back in. After many frustrating years, I decided to build my own observatory. It's nice and warm in the winter and nice and cool in the summer, and I stay away from the moisture problems."

While Calvert said he keeps his eye on two galaxies waiting for supernovas, he mainly uses his observatory for stellar photography. "It marries different things that I've done in my life," he said. "That makes it fun that I can put those things together."

Keeping things fun and interesting is what many stargazers in Kentucky do for those who attend their events. "While we still have all the science there, we're taking it to the people," Alderson said. "What is great about astronomy is that everything is so perfect in the skies. I can sit here with a program and tell you what the moon was on your birthday. I can take you back to the night you were born and show you what the night sky was over your mother."

Schrantz said BAAC members want to give children and adults the chance to look through a telescope and see the sky from a different perspective. "Some do not get a chance to do that very often," he said, adding that it's not just one type of person who enjoys looking through that telescope. Club members include a cabinet-maker, a government employee and political science professors, to name a few. "Nobody here is a professional astronomer. It's just a hobby of ours," he said. "There are all different mixes of people, but they all like to look through the telescope."

Alderson agreed, saying the LAS also comprises people from different walks of life.

"We are a lot of people sharing the night sky with everybody we can," he said.

Photos courtesy of Fred Calvert, Cold Spring Observatory.

Here is a list of planetariums found in Kentucky. We also included a list of astronomy groups and clubs to take a trip to the stars one step further.

Kentucky Planetariums

Gheen's Science Hall and Rauch Planetarium
University of Louisville,
Belknap Campus
(502) 852-6664
www.louisville.edu/planetarium

East Kentucky Science Center and Planetarium
Big Sandy Community and Technical College, Prestonsburg
(606) 889-8260
www.bigsandy.kctcs.edu/EKSC

Golden Pond Planetarium
Golden Pond Visitor Center
Land Between the Lakes,
Golden Pond
(270) 924-2000

Hardin Planetarium at Western Kentucky University
Department of Physics & Astronomy
Western Kentucky University,
Bowling Green
(270) 745-4044
www.physics.wku.edu/planetarium

Hummel Planetarium
Eastern Kentucky University,
Richmond
(859) 622-1547
www.planetarium.eku.edu

Kentucky Astronomy Clubs

West Kentucky Amateur Astronomers
www.wkaa.net

Louisville Astronomical Society
www.louisville-astro.org

Bluegrass Amateur Astronomy Club
www.bgaac.org



Upcoming Astronomical Events in Kentucky's Skies

March 5

Mars at Opposition

Want to get a good look at the red planet? This is the best night to see Mars, as it will be fully illuminated by the sun.

March 26

Beautiful Trio

Venus and Jupiter will shine brightly near a crescent moon, creating a trio of bright, celestial lights in the night sky. Jupiter will be 3 degrees south of the moon. Venus will be 1.8 degrees north of the moon.

April 22

Lyrids Meteor Shower

With no moon to brighten the night sky, this average meteor shower should put on a good show in the days leading up to and beyond April 22.

May 21

Annular Solar Eclipse

The sun will shine brightly behind the moon. Since the moon is not completely eclipsing the sun, it will have a bright ring glowing around it.

June 4

Partial Lunar Eclipse

June 5-6

Venus Crosses the Sun

This will be the last time in our lifetime to see Venus cross the face of the sun. The next scheduled visible trip? 2117.

August 13

Perseids Meteor Shower

November 17-18

Leonids Meteor Shower

November 27

Venus and Saturn

These two bright planets will be very close to each other this night—less than 1 degree—in the east near sunrise.

December 3

Jupiter at Opposition

Jupiter comes the closest to Earth this night.

December 13-14

Geminids Meteor Shower

With up to 60 meteors per hour, the Geminids Meteor Shower is a favorite among stargazers. A new moon that night also will allow for optimal viewing.

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They are open each week for School Programs and Public Programs. For more information call visit www.planetarium.eku.edu, or call 859-622-1547.

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Richmond Visitor Center, Exit 87 off I-75. For more information call 1.800.866.3705 or www.richmondkytourism.com

Louisville Teacher Brings Stars to Students

It's a quiet night at Long Run Park in far eastern Jefferson County. Eric Timerding points out something in the bright night sky. All at once, tablet computers pop up over people's heads, illuminating the faces of parents and students alike. "We have entered a really cool age with this," said Timerding, Crosby Middle School teacher and sponsor of the school's astronomy club. "Parents have the cool toys."

Several times a month, Timerding brings his astronomy club students, along with their family and friends, to Long Run Park not only to show them the stars, but also to teach them the wonders of the night sky. It started in 1999 when teachers wanted to come up with new and unique ways they could share their hobbies with students. Timerding wanted to share the stars. "It's my passion. It's my love. It's what I find fascinating, and I want to share that," he said. "There's a part of all of us who wants to share something that is good and unique that we possess that we want to give."

In the beginning, the club used Timerding's personal binoculars and a telescope. After writing letters to telescope makers and distributors, they obtained equipment that was a little more sophisticated. Now they have a club telescope that allows them to dive farther into the night sky. "The first few sessions start with a look at stars and planets and learn our way around with the naked eye," he said. "Then we learn the constellations that are easy to see and identifiable. From there, we start learning about individual star names, what kind of star it is and more."

Most meetings take place on a Friday night and each student must be accompanied by an adult.

"The parental involvement is an absolute safety issue," Timerding said. But there's an added and sometimes unforeseen benefit to that rule. "It's just fun. That's when the kids and their parents get drawn into this thing."

Timerding said it's not hard to be drawn into his passion for the stars. As Crosby's music teacher, he is able to blend both astronomy and music into his club meetings. "It's the rhythm and rhyme of the night sky," he said. "You go outside and you look at it. Why not know what you're looking at? The moon is ever changing and ever beautiful, so getting out and letting kids experience that and knowing what they're seeing is very important."

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- ✓ Dazzling Daylily Festival June 22-30
- ✓ ROMP: Bluegrass Roots & Branches Festival June 28-30

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