

HEAVENLY VIEWS – “MESSIER AROUND ALL NIGHT”

By Tim Geoghegan, Lead Docent

In my last article, we learned about the famous ‘wannabe’ comet hunter Charles Messier. While he did discover 20 comets, he will forever be famous, not for his list of comets, but for his “Messier Objects” list of beautiful deep space objects. These nebulae, star clusters, and galaxies are truly wonders to behold.

Everyone learned in elementary science class that the evening sky changes gradually throughout the year as we revolve around the sun. Through an interesting quirk of our orbit, at about this time of year, in the Northern Hemisphere at our latitude one can see, if they try, all 110 of the Messier Objects in one night.

Astronomy clubs around the country hold “all-nighters” called Messier Marathons as a challenge to observe the whole list in one night. They are usually scheduled on a weekend evening with little to no moon. Shortly after sunset, as the sky darkens, the first few of the Messier objects come into view just over the western horizon. Observers ‘bag’ them like a game hunter, making their way Eastward across the sky. One must move at a fair pace, finding an object about every 6-7 minutes on average, throughout the night. If one gets ahead of schedule, a nap can be enjoyed for an hour or so just after midnight. The last few are difficult to find as the pre-dawn sky begins to brighten.

I mentioned the desire for no moon. Why? Deep space objects are fairly faint. Only a few can be seen with our naked eye, and only in very dark skies. The bright moon tends to “wash out” the night sky rendering these faint objects all but invisible in the bright sky-glow. Likewise, the night sky can be ‘washed out’ by man-made artificial light that is wastefully shone up into the sky. Those of us in rural El Dorado County are blessed to be some distance from the bigger cities and therefore enjoy grander views of the night sky. I’ll have more in a future article on light pollution and what you can do to help reduce it.

Lastly, if you want to get a really good look at the Messier objects and other wonders of the night sky, visit your local Cameron Park Community Observatory, located in Placerville, at the Folsom Lake Community College. Free to the public on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, our docent staff and telescope equipment combine to provide you with spectacular views of planets and deep space wonders like the Messier Objects. Go to <https://www.communityobservatory.com> for more information.