

“Close Call with a Comet”

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Cameron Park Rotary Community Observatory

On average, several comets grace our skies each year, but most are very faint and difficult to observe. On rare occasions a comet might put on a brilliant celestial show, displaying a bright core and one or more flowing tails of dust and gas. This October, we have an opportunity to observe an interesting comet that, while not bright, may nonetheless put on quite a show of its own. The Comet is named 103PHartley2, or just Hartley2.

While Comet Hartley2 has an orbital period around the Sun of a little over 6 years, it was discovered only 24 years ago. Historically, Hartley2's travels through the inner solar system brought it no closer to Earth than about 100 million miles. However, encounters with the gravity field of the planet Jupiter in 1947, 1971, and 1982 shifted its path, bringing it much nearer to Earth's orbit, and setting the stage for one of the closest cometary approaches in over 200 years.

On October 20th, Comet Hartley2 will pass a scant 11 million miles from Earth and may brighten to naked eye visibility under a reasonably dark sky. But another event earlier in the month promises to be even more memorable for observers equipped with binoculars or a small telescope.

On Thursday, October 7th, as Comet Hartley2 passes through the northern sky, it will skim less than one degree from a cosmic landmark for amateur astronomers. Acknowledged as one of the most outstanding telescopic objects in the northern heavens, the famed Double Cluster in Perseus floats more than 7400 light years from Earth. Each star cluster is about 14 million years old and contains more than 300 stellar super-giants sparkling like diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and topaz on an ebony field.

Anyone with binoculars or small telescope and a back yard with reasonably dark sky may witness the passage of Comet Hartley2 that evening, but to assure your success the Community Observatory will be open to the public on Thursday, October 7th from 7:00pm to 10:00pm with a variety of telescopes well suited to provide excellent views of the event. Trained Docents will be there to guide you to the comet. While there is no cost to visit the observatory, a \$1.00 per vehicle college parking fee is required for mid-week events such as this.

Another ‘Must-Do’ observatory event for your calendar is the Fall Astronomy Day Open House at the Community Observatory, to be held on Saturday, October 16th, 6:30 PM – 10:30 PM. In addition to a wide assortment of telescopes for observing planets, star clusters, and galaxies, visitors may also attend special evening events, one of which will feature a visit by none other than Galileo Galilei himself. Discoverer of lunar craters, the major moons of Jupiter, and the rings of Saturn, the colorful Sr. Galilei will be with us to provide an up front and personal account of his observations.

The Community Observatory is located at the El Dorado Center campus of Folsom Lake College, 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. For more information and directions to the observatory, go to www.communityobservatory.com. The Docents at the observatory look forward to seeing you at these events.