

Black Forest Star Party - September, 2013

As the damp summer of 2013 began to wind down, it was time to flip the calendar from August to September and prepare for the Black Forest Star Party up at Cherry Springs State Park. From watching the variable weather forecast seesaw between clear and cloudy, I had some concerns about the event, but hoped for the best.

Sunday 9/1/2013:

With this year's BFP falling the weekend after Labor Day, I decided to make the most of it, and headed up to Cherry Springs on the 1st of September. The drive up started out with clouds and mist south of Pittsburgh, but once I made it up to Bennezette, the sky began to clear. After getting past the stopped traffic from Elk watchers, the drive was quite beautiful. Blue sky overhead, white and grey towering nimbus clouds off in the distance, and rays of golden sunlight falling down among the dark green hills rising steeply away from the road. The stream were all amuddy brown and up over their banks.

I arrived mid-afternoon at the park to find Bob K from Kiski setting up in our usual spot, next to good friend Dennis of York. A new acquaintance, Tracy from Delaware was setting up inside the Sky Shed.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-01.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-02.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-03.jpg>

There were already about 30-40 campers on site, including Bob and Paul, also from the York area who had weathered a lightning storm the night before that had sent them all running to their cars. A sit was a large thunderstorm was fast approaching from the northwest when I arrived, so I very quickly got my camper in order. Fortunately, the storm veered off to the east, missing the park.

The rest of the afternoon and evening was intervals of sun and clouds but other than a few sprinkles no serious storms.

I went ahead and assembled my new C-Gem mount with the 6" RC and aligned the finderscope. Also setup my Samsung DC435 videocamera on a tripod and captured several AVI clips of threatening clouds. Later that evening, we were treated to large sucker holes allowing us to naked-eye observe a number of bright stars including Arcturus, Antares, Vega, Deneb, Altair, along with their home constellations. The Milky Way would also put in an appearance from time-to-time. Around 9:30pm a large storm with cloud-to-cloud lightening passed to the NE. of us, putting on a nice fireworks display.

Bob, Tracy, and I pulled out our lawn chairs and enjoyed watching the nature show. Around 10:30pm, with the storm drawing away, I headed inside my little teardrop camper and watched anovie, calling it anight shortly after midnight. During the wee hours, I heard a light rain hitting the camper roof vent.

Monday 9/2/2013:

The day started off as a misty, dreary, cool morning. By 11:00am, the sun had appeared, drying off the observing field. Bob K and I headed down to Lymann Park. It wasn't long after we got back to CS that Denny H from Kiski arrived and setup camp across from us.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-04.jpg>

The sky conditions continued to be partly cloudy with the temp getting warm. Fortunately, there was a steady breeze that kept us cool and helped dry out the field. During the day, a number of other folks pulled in, including Tom P who setup next to Denny, and by mid-afternoon, the number of observers had grown to about 50.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-05.jpg>

While the NOAA weather radio wasn't so promising for the night, the clear sky dock for CS was promising decent skies for the evening. But around 3:30pm, everyone's weather radio alarm began sounding. A severe thunderstorm with 60+ MPH winds and hail was approaching Cherry Springs. The park rangers even drove around and warned everyone of the pending storm. We quickly began battling down the hatches stowing everything that could possibly go airborne, and tightened the tent canopy stakes. With dark clouds and thunder all around, and the radio alerts continuing to sound, we headed for the car to ride out the storm. Once again, luck shined on Cherry Springs as a strong wind from the southwest blew the storm around the park, with it dropping only a steady rain for about 20 minutes. After the storm ended, we all brought back out our camping stuff and waited for the evening. By 6:30pm, the sky had gone back to partly cloudy with bits of sunshine and a light breeze.

At dusk, with the skies more promising, I attached the StellaCam video camera to the 6" RC and 50mm finder and brought both to alignment and focus. Once dark enough to see Polaris peeking thru the haze, I quickly did a rough manual polar align and powered on the C-Gem mount, and then proceeded to do a 2-star alignment and then fine-tuned that with a polar align using the video camera. Bob and Denny both had opted not to setup their telescopes and instead pulled up lawn chairs for a little naked-eye sidder-hole Milky Way observing. After doing a 'test' star-hop to globular cluster M3 and the Whirlpool Galaxy M51, I started working on my observing projects thru the sidder-holes. Using the GOTO to quickly center me on the object I was after was a big help in taking advantage of the sky conditions. My 1st project of the night was to finish a list of bright planetary nebulae of which I had 9 left to observe. I proceeded to acquire IC 4593 over in Hercules then slewed to Cygnus which was overhead in the clear to add another 4 (IC 6884, 7026, 7027 & 7048). The dew was quite heavy, soaking everything, and I had to run the heaters at full for the entire evening. Then I hurried over to Sagittarius which had popped out from behind a cloud bank to catch MGC 6818, before it was hidden once again in another fast approaching cloud. Around 10:00pm, the clouds finally thickened up and closed down the entire sky.

A distant thunderstorm filled the SW sky with vivid lightening. Bob and Denny both headed in to bed. I hesitantly waited till 10:30pm to see if it would move past, but decided to shut down the telescope and camera and quickly covered up. The next day, I heard that it had once again cleared off by midnight.

Tuesday 9/3/2013:

Awoke to a sunny sky and cooler temps. A cold front had passed thru overnight. But soon, it began to cloud over and an occasional misty rain went over the observing field. After breakfast, Denny and I headed into town to pick up a few items at the local hardware store. As we were preparing to leave, our good friend Don P from the Hamilton Ont club arrived and setup across from me, beside Denny.

We made Don a temporary Kiski Astronomer member for the week.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-06.jpg>

After visiting the hardware store and gassing up the car, we headed back to the park. A number of folks started pulling in. Bob II from Kiski arrived and set up next to Bob K.

Bob brought his new Canon lens with him for the trip.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-07.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-08.jpg>

Mike from New Jersey and Nick pulled in on the other side of Dennis

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-09.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-10.jpg>

I figured at this point, we had over 100 folks on the field. Throughout the day, the weather went back and forth from sunny to rain. The dearskydock once again called for clearing later in the evening, so Bob, Denny, and all the other new comers assembled their telescopes in anticipation.

Then late in the afternoon, the sun was finally completely covered by clouds and by evening there wasn't any hope for dearskies that night. At 8:00pm, I went in to read. After confirming at 10:00pm that it was still cloudy, I watched an movie till midnight. After checking the overcast sky one last time, I went to bed. What a sad evening!!!

Wednesday 9/4/2013:

Woke to another dreary dawn, so rolled over and slept in. Finally crawled out of the camper around 9:30am to a cool damp cloudy day. The weather radio was promising sunshine and warmer weather in the afternoon and dearskies that evening. We'll see,....

After breakfast, Bob K, Bob II and I went for a walk along the hiking trail. The path had become a bit overgrown and eroded over the last couple of years, but we still had an enjoyable stroll thru the trees. Upon returning to camp, I headed over across Rt 44 to the outdoor planetarium. I wanted to scout out a good observing location for Friday night's moon shot from Wallops Island, Virginia. It will be low on the horizon, but we have a good chance of seeing it from Cherry Springs. The park had done quite a bit of work at the outdoor planetarium site, re-orienting the benches to face towards the East, and putting in a new parking area. They have plans for re-routing the main entrance several 100 feet down the road towards town to keep the car headlights from shining onto the main observing field. Also, they are building a small observatory to house a telescope used by the rangers in the monthly sky program. Back in August, they had over a 1000 people show up for the Perseid Meteor shower!!

By now, the sky had completely cleared off with brilliant sunshine to a beautiful blue and just a few white puffy clouds. I had a quick view of the sun thru Mike's 60mm Coronado solar scope. There were several nice limb prominences and disk filaments visible. In particular, there was a large eruptive prominence on the Eastern limb that showed good movement and structural changes over a half hour period. I attempted to switch out the 6" RC with my 8" SCT optical tube on the C-Gem mount and use the .6A Daystar H-alpha filter but decided to hold off for Thursday. More campers continued to pour into the observing field, with the place looking half full. Must have been at least 250+ astronomers there, including Eric and his Dad from Eastern Pa.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-11.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-12.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-27.jpg>

At sunset, the sky was completely clear, and all the astronomers began uncovering their telescopes in preparation of the coming night. Once dark enough, I re-did my polar alignment of the C-Gem and hopped around a few of the brighter Messier objects, waiting for full darkness. I started off with my planetary nebula observing project by re-doing IC 4593 in Hercules and NGC 6818 in Sagittarius and then continued working in Sagittarius before he sat in the SW, to catch several objects that I had missed from previous constellation survey work - NGC 6565, 6589-90-95, 6882 (Barnard's Galaxy), RU 136 and TR 31. Again, dew became heavy, to the point of beginning to drip off of the telescope. But the dew heaters, purring on high, kept the optics nice and dry! After wrapping up what I could in Sagittarius, took a break from the constellation survey and finished off the planetary nebula observing project by capturing the final three objects over in Perseus and Auriga - IC 351, 2003, and 2149. I then went back to the Collinder open cluster project, video-capturing a cluster each in Perseus and Auriga - NGC 956 and 1605.

During the observing with the 6" RC and Stellafane I had the Samsung DC435 video-camera on a tripod, capturing time lapse of the glowing Sagittarius Milky Way. Later, I combined the night's footage with cloud avi clips from earlier in the week to make this movie: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBaT7vXSeko&feature=player_detailpage Scattered clouds began rolling in around 11:00pm, and continued off and on until the sky went completely overcast by 1:00am. While Bob K, Bob N, Denny H and I were standing around Bob K's telescope complaining to each other about the clouds, a brilliant bolide lit up the skies at 11:08pm, falling thru Aquarius to the horizon. It briefly lit up the ground around us, casting shadows. Some folks reported hearing a sonic boom! I caught the light reflecting off a cloud bank with the Samsung. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnlZiHE6ut8&feature=player_detailpage <http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-13.jpg> For the next couple of hours, I made the most of the clear gaps, slewing from one section of the sky to another, video-capturing the objects on my observing list. Finally, at 1:30am, I gave up and covered up the telescope and went to bed. A decent night!

Thursday 9/5/2013:

The noise of other campers woke me earlier than planned to a clear blue sky and cool temperatures. Soon the bit of low fog and dew had burned off and the observing field dried off nicely. The park workers arrived to pitch the registration and vendor tent, with a number of vendors waiting patiently to set up their goods. This included our good friend Jeff of CCTS. Later that morning, Mike from Niagara, Canada and Dave K, Wini and John L from the Kiski club arrived. John assembled his 14" Meade LX 200 SCT beside Denny.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-14.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-15.jpg>

With the vendors setting up, around noon, a number of attendees began an impromptu swap meet among the picnic tables where I picked up several old books and Deep Sky magazines. After lunch, I officially signed in at the registration tent. Headed back to camp and brought out the solar observing equipment, swapping the 6" RC with an 8" SCT optical tube, attaching a Coronado PST and my .6A Daystar H-alpha filter. Observed a number of prominences and sunspots in H-alpha though there wasn't as much activity as the previous day. Left the solar equipment up and running thru the afternoon.

All day, people poured into the observing field, looking for a place to squeeze into and setup. By now, there must have been a good 500 observers there!

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-16.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-17.jpg>

The sky stayed beautifully clear and blue, and at sunset, the air temperature began dropping rapidly and dew started forming. All over the observing field, hundreds of telescopes were uncovered and pointed skywards. Excitement hung in the air, as one by one, the stars soon appeared, followed by the glowing band of the Milky Way!! The crisp cool air, clear sky, and brilliant stars down to the horizon made me wish I had time to just sit for a while and take in the spectacular view opening over our heads. But I had too many objects on my observing list to spend more than a few short minutes absorbing the naked-eye wonders before getting down to serious observing business!

I started with the Collinder open cluster project in Cygnus and Cepheus where I had left off the previous evening, CR 419, 421, 428, 471, and NGC 7023 & 7419. After about an hour, I switched over to working my E.E. Barnard Dark Nebula project, chasing down a number of them in Aquila B127, 129, 130, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, and LD 684. Around 1:00am I then moved on to my constellation survey work in Andromeda picking up a number of previously missed objects, galaxies NGC 214, 232, 687, 708, 710, 759, 797, 801, 818, 828, 834, 841, 845, 906, and 914.

While in the area I visited the Pinwheel Galaxy M33, NGC 891, the Crab Nebula M1, and then headed over to the south for the Silver Coin Galaxy - NGC 253.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-18.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-19.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-20.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-21.jpg>

Around 2:30am, the seeing went soft, with the Cygnus Milky Way dimming. I took a break and went inside the camper to warm up and change into heavier clothes. The temperature had dropped into the 40's and before I was done for the night, we could hover close to 35 degrees. I didn't personally see any frost, though the next day I heard a few others mention having some form on their equipment. Both of the Bob's called it a night, with Wini, John, and Dave retiring earlier. Denny, Don, and I decided to make a night of it, continuing our observing/imaging and encouraging each other to stay up for the morning zodiacal light. I picked up observing with another round of Collinder open clusters in Auriga and Taurus CR 62, 65, NGC 1883, 1893, and 2192. After another trip inside around 3:30 to warm up, I setup the Sam's video camera and pointed it toward the eastern sky. Soon, around 4:30am, I began detecting hints of glow, and by a quarter to 5:00, we were rewarded with a nice display of zodiacal light rising up as a pyramid glow out of the east, stretching from the horizon from Mars just above the tree-line to higher up toward Castor and Pollux in Gemini.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-22.jpg>

Shortly after 5:00am, I turned off the cameras and monitors, covered up the telescope, and went to bed. It was a great night at Cherry Springs!!

Fri 9/6/2013:

After about 6 hours of sleep, I finally woke from the noise of the crowded observing field.

The day started off brisk and sunny. After putting away a few items and reviewing the observations from the night before, I visited the vendor tent again, where I purchased a great book from Jeff/CCTS on the Arp galaxies. I plan on using that for a 2014 observing project.

Tony and Ross from the Kiski club arrived shortly after lunch to partly hazy skies (I was down for a nap).

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-23.jpg>

All day, more and more folks continued to arrive and fill any open spot on the field.

The Kiski group gathered together at Denny's tent where Willini and John cooked up a round of hot sausages for everyone. Very tasty!!

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-24.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-25.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-26.jpg>

Late that afternoon/early evening, Bob K, Bob L, Denny H, and I went for a stroll around the observing field. We were in awe of how many amateur astronomers were there! It was so packed, people were camping at the far ends of the observing field under the trees in the north field beside the vendor's tent, by the registration tent near the park entrance, and even beside the porta-johns!

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-28.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-29.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-30.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-31.jpg>

As we walked around, even more arrived, circling the roads looking for a place to pull in a camper or pitch a tent. There was an amazing assembly of telescope equipment on the field. Every style, make and model must have been present, from some all basic dobsonians and refractors to advanced imaging rigs with state-of-the-art camera hanging everywhere!

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-32.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-33.jpg>

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<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-43.jpg>

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-44.jpg>

We ran into amateurs that we knew at every turn in the road, from Dublin over the east coast. I even met local South Hills astronomer Danny K at the far end of the field.

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-45.jpg>

As sundown approached, a high haze began building, and the weather radio changed its tune, calling for a cloudy night. Staying optimistic, I decided to try out my new LRGB imaging filter set and attached the filter slider and iExGuide autoguider. But with the stars struggling to shine through the murky skies I ended up sitting around with the Kiski group, commiserating about the sad state of the sky above us. A little later, I noticed that over in the N.E. sky, Cassiopeia was in the clear. I hurried over to my waiting scope and proceeded to video-capture about a dozen Collinder clusters that I needed. CR 33, 34, 36, 463, NGC 146, 281, 366, 609, IC 1805, 1848, TR 1 and Harvard-20.

By the time I had finished, it had partly cleared off over in Sagittarius, so I attempted an LRGB imaging session on the Lagoon Nebula - M 8. Here's some of the 'red' filter shots

<http://home.comcast.net/~lemastro/conventions/BF2013-46.jpg>

Shortly after 11:00pm, we all trooped over to the outdoor planetarium to see if we could catch the rocket launch of the LADEE lunar satellite from Wallops Island Virginia at 11:27pm.

Right on time, we were able to see a bright 'star' arching up over the S.E. tree-line.

After a momentary disappearance, the rocket reappeared as the second stage kicked in. Very cool!!

After returning back to camp, the sky finally began to close down with a general thick overcast.

By midnight it was all over! After standing around for a while with the group, cursing the weather, most headed off to bed. I gave it another half hour, but with the darkening clouds and a damp breeze picking up, I reluctantly shut down the cameras and video monitors, covered up the telescope, closed the back of the camper and also went to bed. What a lousy disappointing end to a promising day.

Saturday 9/7/2013:

A passing shower overnight led to a damp field. I rolled out of bed early at 8:00am, as I knew it was going to be a busy day with my 'Venus Transit' presentation scheduled for later that afternoon.

Soon the sky went to partly cloudy and between the sun and a slight breeze, the observing field quickly dried out. The weather radio forecast announced that it was a lost cause for any clear sky that evening - 40% chance of rain. Additionally, those with smart phones with a weather app showed a big blob of clouds and rain heading our way. A lot of folks began packing up and pulled out throughout the day.

After I gave my presentation, which was well attended, Denny and I grabbed an early dinner at the food vendor. The field was almost half empty by late afternoon, but for the final presentation and raffle it was still standing room only.

During the afternoon, I walked around and visited with some folks and like everyone else, began putting things away. I wanted to leave the telescope setup for the public night, just in case we got a lucky sucker hole or two later that evening. We all wrapped up packing in time to head over to the pavilion at 5:00pm for the keynote speaker, Dr. Carey Lisse, whose topic was Comet Ison.

The gist of it was that while Ison may end up not being the 'Comet of the Century', it should still be a damned fine sight in the evening December skies!

After the talk, came the park update from Maxine and Chip, followed by the doorprize drawing in which Bob Kwon announced a meteorite chip identified from the Moon, and more appropriately, a chip from Mars. While during the raffle drawing, several light rain showers went thru soaking the field. What a bum merr!

Afterwards Bob K, Denny, and I continued to pack away stuff, while Dave K, Bob H, Wini and John L drove into town for dinner. There was almost a traffic jam of attendees pulling out, heading for home. At dusk, Bob K went to bed early, while Denny, Don P, and I entertained the few public visitors wondering about the field. During a dry lull, I packed away the telescope. Shortly after I finished, the gang arrived back from town, and we all stood around visiting for a bit longer.

Eventually everyone headed off to their camps, and Don P headed home to Canada.

In bed by 10:30pm, listening to the rain tapping on the camper roof.

Ihusended the Black Forest Star Party - 2013.

Sunday 9/8/2013:

After a good night's sleep, was up early at 7:30am to complete packing up the inside of the camper.

The Bob's had already pulled out for home. It was a wet, cloudy/misty morning.

After a quick breakfast, finished breaking camp, saw Denny off on his way home, made my own goodbyes, and hit the road for Pittsburgh at 9:30am.

So with BFP 2013 coming to a close, the damp star party weather streak for 2013 continued.

One of Denny H's last parting comments was "Worst Astronomy Summer Ever!"

I think he may be correct. There's only one more convention left to turn it around.

Hidden Hollow 2013 on October 4th & 5th. With any luck, it will save the year.

Larry McDHenry

Astronomical Webportal: <http://home.com cast.net/~lsnch/>