

## ORAS - AstroBlast: August, 2019

The summer months seem to pass quickly this year, and it was soon close to Labor-Day and time for the 2019 Oil Region Astronomical Society's AstroBlast convention. Having started a new job just two weeks prior, I was limited on time-off, so I could only leave a few hours early on Friday for the drive up to the new ORAS observatory.

### Friday 8/30/2019:

After leaving the office, I hurried back home to change out of my work clothes and hook-up my Tab teardrop camper to the SUV. I had packed the camper and car the night before in hopes that I could get through rush-hour before it became heavy. Hit the road at 3:30pm and was soon stalled in the Pittsburgh holiday rush traffic, which threw me a good hour behind schedule. Once I was well past the Pittsburgh 'Burbs', it was clear sailing on the highway, and I eventually arrived at the observatory site near Clarion PA by 6:30pm. After saying 'hello' to the ORAS club members working the registration tent - Marianne H, Kelly & John O, and Tim S, I caught the tail-end of Dan H's talk on using Kstars software to control your telescope. As the talk let out of the members building, I was greeted by Bob K, Denny H, Ed K (of the Kiski Club), along with Tom H, and Dan. There was even one of the Calhoun regulars there - John D. Afterwards I headed up the hill to the observatory and setup camp between Ed and Bob. There were already a fair number of other campers on the field to the north and east of the observatory building, with close to 50 registrations that didn't include family members.



Denny and Bob then gave me a tour of the roof opening mechanism changes that they had worked on during the week. It functioned wonderfully!!! They did a great job of it! As the Sun was setting, I hurried to gather my camera, laptop, and telescope accessories, and installed a flip-mirror and my ZWO ASI294MC Pro camera on the observatory's 14" Meade LX200 equatorial wedge telescope. My plan was to use the 14" SCT with the flip-mirror and camera to hit the bright showcase Messier objects, take a short exposure of a few stacked subs to display on the laptop and flip the mirror up to a parfocal eyepiece so that attendees could both observe the object visually and see the captured image on the laptop. This plan worked out well, as once darkness began to fall, scattered clouds rolled-in and for most of the evening we played a game of 'Sucker Hole'!! I would slew the 14" telescope to an object, grab a quick image, and let folks look thru the eyepiece before clouds wiped-out the visual view, and then directed everyone over to the laptop image. Using this method, in addition to the planets Jupiter and Saturn, we also observed open cluster M11, globulars M13 & M22, the Ring Nebula - M57, the Dumbbell - M27, along with several other bright planetaries: NGC6826 - Blinking Nebula, NGC 6905 - Blue Flash, and NGC7009 - Saturn nebula. Unfortunately, being too busy with the crowd, I never saved any of the images! ☹

While I was using the 14" LX200, Denny, Bob, and Dan were attempting to use Kstars on a Linux machine inside the warm-up room to operate the 14" Celestron/CGEM telescope. They had some success imaging galaxies which they shared on their laptops with the public.



Ed K assisted Tim S, and Kelly & John O with crowd control and running the visual 30" StarStructure dob reflector. They observed most of the same Messier objects that I was doing with the 14", so it gave the attendees a good comparison. Around 10:30pm, I took a break from the 14" during a larger clearing in the clouds and used my 5mw green-laser to give a live impromptu constellation and starlore show. While it was somewhat hampered by the clouds, everyone did get to see a number of stars and constellations pointed out and learned some of the night sky mythology associated with them. After the crowd finally died down around 1am, I spent some time visiting with the ORAS and Kiski members there at the observatory, but by 2am I was getting tired, so I shutdown the 14" LX200 telescope and called it a night.

**Saturday 8/31/2019:**

Slept in till mid-morning. After breakfast, sat around camp with Bob, Denny, Ed, Dan, and Tom, discussing all things astronomical and watching Dan attempt to fly his drone using a new cell-phone app. At 1pm, I walked down to the members building to take in an interesting talk on 'interstellar travel - fact & fiction', by Dr Jack H. I then stopped over at the swap table and bought an old Norton's Star Atlas, and then visited the raffle table and dropped in a few tickets. Visited with several other ORAS members while there - Debbie & Steve B, Mike A, John K.



At 2pm, I gave my 'Planetary Nebula' talk to a nice size audience in the classroom. A number of good questions followed the presentation. Afterwards, I headed back up the hill to the camp until it was time for the pizza party and door prize raffle. After dinner, with the weather forecast for the night not looking good, Bob headed off for home, while Denny, Ed, and I staying for the raffle. (Ed was also planning on heading home, but waited till after the raffle ended to leave). Several ORAS members won prizes, including Nate S, Mike, Kelly, and Denny took home the grand prize, a very nice pair of 15x70 binoculars!

While most of the attendees walked back up to the observatory and their camps, I stayed to help the ORAS crew break down the outdoor tents before heading back to my camper to change into warmer clothes. Once the Sun had set behind the trees, the temperature started to drop!

After consulting the weather forecast and satellite images, we decided the storms to our SW had stalled-out and wouldn't bother us until late in the evening, so we opened up the observatory roof. It was another night of chasing objects thru the clouds, and I spent the clear patches on many of the same objects as the night before.

I also reprised my green-laser night sky mythology tour. But tonight, the sucker holes were smaller and the clouds grew thicker until toward midnight, the sky became completely overcast.

We shutdown the telescopes and closed up the observatory and sat around Denny's camper for another hour enjoying a few cold beverages. We all called it a night around 1:30am.

### **Sunday 9/1/2019:**

Up early to the noise of folks packing up. The weather forecast was calling for thunderstorms and heavy rain later in the afternoon, so everyone had decided to cut short the event and head home. Dan and Denny were soon headed toward home, and after I said my goodbyes, was on the road by 10am. Good timing, as I hadn't gone more than 20 miles when I drove into a thunderstorm! Was back home to Pittsburgh and sunny skies by noon, and after unpacking, we headed for a milkshake!

So, even though for me, this year was a shortened event and the weather wasn't the best, it was still a fun time getting out under dark skies and observing at the ORAS observatory with all my astronomy friends at the 2019 AstroBlast.

Looking forward to next year!

Larry McHenry

Astronomical Webportal: <http://www.stellar-journeys.org/>