



# Just...Stop It

By Brad Young, Astronomy Club of Tulsa

Amateur astronomy is an exciting and gratifying hobby that includes observing many things that do not change within human lifetimes, but also includes changes to the appearance of objects and even new objects to view in the night sky. Most media coverage tends to concentrate on the second type, with new comets, exploding stars, and other interesting things that the public may not fully understand but that provide great pictures and stories people can appreciate. Recently, the big story has been Comet C/2023 A3 Tsuchinshan-ATLAS that was nearly a victim of flying too close to the Sun like Daedalus but escaped a fiery end to re-emerge in the evening sky for most of the world's population to see.

That sort of story is sure to get press, and this comet was no exception. With the usual mixture of delusion and one-upmanship, clickbait type websites and science adjacent publications started recording on the new comet before it had even gotten near the inner solar system. That's nothing new, but what was new this time and has become more and more the norm, was real journalism and astronomy publishing frothing at the bit to jump on the bandwagon.

## The Biennial Comet of the Century



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### How to spot 'comet of the century' in UK

On the radio, stalwarts like BBC and NPR presented stories with reasonable expectations but certainly the promos and headlines read differently, comet of the century, easily seen in daytime, and all the other hyperbole that attends most comets discovered these days that have even a chance of visiting the inner solar system.



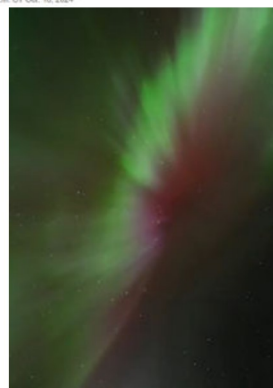
The mainstream astronomy magazines jump right in with special issues to describe the upcoming blaze of glory. Oh, I'm sorry, that was, ISON, you remember that one, right? I find it interesting that on the same cover from 2015, there is the following article "20 bright comets of the past 50 years". So that's a bright comet every two and a half years of my lifetime. I remember seeing 3 or 4 in that time, and this is my main hobby. In fact, of the 20 they list, I had only heard of a few. But there has been a "Comet of the Century!" just about every other year since then.

## Aurorae Equatorus

### Another geomagnetic storm may bring Aurora Borealis to parts of Texas tonight. See where

The aurora borealis may be viewable to the naked eye in the northern Panhandle and Amarillo. Cities around Lubbock and Dallas may see the Northern Lights with a good camera in a low-light setting.

Brandi D. Addison  
USA TODAY NETWORK  
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Mesmerizing aurora shines above stunned stargazers

Another favorite subject to be touted is the aurora, which can be visible in Texas during geomagnetic storms. But "visible" is relative, and pairing the headline with a video from Alaska seems awkward. Many times, the aurora is low, barely visible at all near cities, and is recorded better by cameras and cell phones. This makes for good TV news, but may be disappointing in person.

## 60 Years and Counting



T Corona Borealis is visible up north though, and since it went Nova about 60 years ago, and may have about 50 years before that (records were sparse), it will obviously suffer another round as recurrent nova this year. If you don't believe me, just reference the muscle shirt available on amazon.com. I couldn't find any references to the outburst listed on the shirt dated 1787, but I'm sure somebody saw something that year, somewhere.



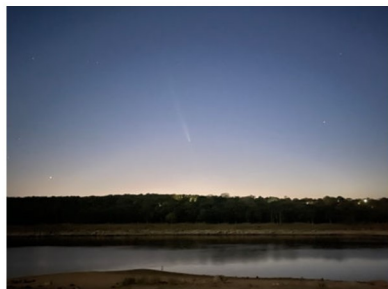
Brian Cox warn(sic): Betelgeuse supernova explosion imminent!

## 420 Years and Counting

Coming back to more recent times, let's not forget one more oopsie. I suppose Betelgeuse has always been rumored to be destined for a supernova, but that possibility seems to morph into fact over the last 4 years. It's been 420 years since the last supernova in the Milky Way that we are aware of. Most models agree that it has been too long between them, so one must be about to blow. To be sure, Eta Carinae is a more likely candidate for a supernova sooner, but it isn't visible from the northern hemisphere where most of the people live, and so is not news.

Besides, Brian Cox says that not only is Betelgeuse going to explode imminently, but that we will not survive the explosion. He must be a believable scientist because he has a British accent. Betelgeuse is known to be 408 light years away. [A study, using the Chandra X-Ray telescope](#), has determined 160 light years to be the minimum safe distance to avoid having our atmosphere stripped away. Why the discrepancy?

Well, I think we all know why. Saying that a star might blow up and it wouldn't destroy the Earth doesn't sell like saying it would. Calling each comet that comes by the "Comet of the Century" gets clicks and sells magazines. Unfortunately, the trough of amateur astronomer patience for the real thing is nearly empty. As an example, every spring in Oklahoma we start getting tornado warnings. First, new residents will go ahead and crawl in the bathtub with a mattress over them. After you've done this every night for a month, you start to realize that weather generates viewers generates income. It's the same thing with amateur astronomy. If I were to write a book about star hopping to find deep sky objects, it might sell a little bit. If I wrote a book about how we're all going to die by being sucked into a mile long piece of spaghetti as we fall into the black hole that used to be the Sun, it will sell more.



Credit: Bob Lieser

## Is There in Truth No Beauty?

As I stood at the banks of Lake Keystone the other night looking at the new comet, there were about a dozen people there, some with cameras, some just sitting and watching. By the time I left at the advent of truly dark sky, I'm not sure anybody else had seen it. I had my binoculars and saw it again though not much better than it had been in downtown Tulsa. Other people just had a blank stare on their face like "where is it?" Online and other sources had claimed you could see it in daytime only a few days before, and now they were in a dark sky looking across a lake with tons of stars visible, but not the comet of the century.

"So what?" you say. A few people were disappointed, the magazines and websites are all struggling to stay alive and are fiercely competitive for the few clicks and reads they get now. They're just trying to get by selling ad space and your personal data. They're not hurting anybody, it might be said. Actually, they are. Every time someone goes outside to see a star supposedly exploding and pictured as being brighter than any in the sky, and they see nothing special, they lose a little bit of hope. It will get to the point where people simply don't believe the media, even the supposedly journalistic and official outlets, and when that happens our hobby is sure to decline even further. No one likes to feel like a dupe, and when you make bogus or extraordinary claims about celestial objects that always fall flat, eventually people will tire of this.

In these times of instant news on a 24-hour cycle, it makes more sense to report the comet after it passes the sun and brightens. No need to say the 17th magnitude blob found 34 AU out will be the next daytime blazer; if it turns out to be that bright, we can react fast enough to see it. Comets and novae tend to last a few days or weeks, and the weather is often the deciding factor on whether an object is seen.

Naysayers will say that I'm just spewing sour grapes. I saw the comet, and I knew better than to expect it to be super bright, based on both experience and by looking it up on COBS, the comet observation database. I know we're supposed to always be positive about everything dealing with astronomy, but too much sugar ruins the lemonade. Tell people the truth and they will appreciate it. I know that if you tell them there is a moderately bright comet outside that is only magnitude 2 and you'll probably need binoculars to see it, many of them stay on the couch. That's a risk that is worth taking, because eventually they will trust the astronomical news again and start going outside confident about what to expect.

## Join the Astronomical League



The mission of the Astronomical League is to promote the science of Astronomy. The major benefit of belonging to this organization is receiving the quarterly newsletter, The Reflector, which keeps you in touch with amateur activities all over the country.

Also:

- Participate in the Observing Program
- Avail yourself of the League Store
- Astronomy Books at a discount
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Only \$9.00 annually,  
(Membership starts July 1)

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