Sophomore Slump

By Brad Young, Astronomy Club of Tulsa

This month's article has several items. Don't forget about the total lunar eclipse on March 3, before dawn. This is a naked eye event, but if you do have binoculars or telescope it's interesting to watch the craters disappear into the shadow. You can even help astronomy by timing these events, which are used to define the size of the umbra (Earth's shadow). Another useful report is on the color of the moon during total eclipse, which provides data on the Earth's atmosphere. For more on these observations, see https://skyandtelescope.org/observing/useful-projects-for-a-lunar-eclipse/.

Danjon Scale of Lunar Eclipse Darkness

We are nearing the equinox, so the geostationary satellites will be flaring during the first week of March as described in my article https://warrenastro.org/newsletter/WASP-2021-03.pdf. And the zodiacal light is prominent in the dusk now too, a cone of dim light visible outside bright city skies (look it up on Wikipedia).

I had the pleasure of presenting a talk on my completion of sketching all the NGC objects to the Bartlesville Astronomy Club on February 2nd. They were quite welcoming and gave me a mug decorated with images club members took.

As some of you may have heard, SpaceX has now requested a license to launch up to one million satellites to support its plan to run data centers in space instead of using resources and causing public concerns with ground stations. The IAU committee I'm on is trying to protect astronomical communities, both professional and amateur, from being deluged by satellite trails but is finding mitigation difficult based on scaling up from the problems that are occurring now. If you would like to comment on the SpaceX application with the FCC, contact me.

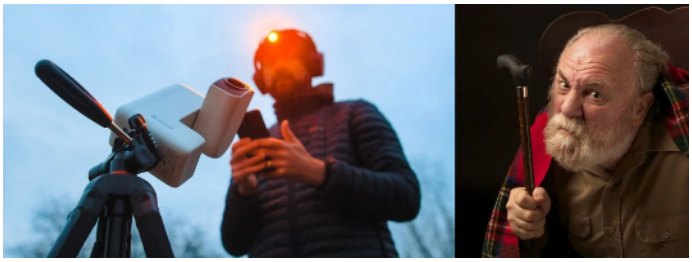
Future night skies with 1 million Starlinks and others

Retaining Members

> "You can listen as well as you hear"
> – The Living Years, Michael Rutherford and Brian David Robertson

The main point of this article is one that has come up several times and will probably be the focus of my next book. I call it the sophomore slump, the period between the exciting beginning of astronomy as a hobby and the confident enjoyment after a few years when you know more. You see it in astronomy clubs, where there is a tendency for members to join with high hopes, then finding it is harder than they thought, they give up on the hobby. This is one of the issues driving the decline in astronomy club membership - especially among young people.

One recommendation I would make is that it's essential when we have initial meetings with future members that we listen to what they want to achieve by becoming active in this hobby. Too often, I think we expect people who are new to astronomy to fit a certain model that we consider to be normal. For instance, with advances in technology and



changes in society, most younger people today are quite comfortable using computerized telescopes run by apps on their phone and are more interested in imaging than visual observing. I base this not only on experience at star parties and outreach events, but on anecdotal evidence and comments from clubs and amateurs all over the country.

This is the way things are moving. New devices such as a Seestar may not seem like "real" observing to some who have been doing this hobby for a while, but it doesn't matter. The way to attract and retain members and, more importantly, to foster their interest in astronomy, is to allow them to find what they are excited by. We do have a responsibility to explain that telescopes can be very expensive, and you don't want to give them buyer's remorse. Still, we can explain the different types of equipment that are available and the different types of observations and other activities that can be done and let the budding amateur astronomer pick their own path.

We experienced amateurs often tell new folks to go around and check out the different types of telescopes. Make an impression by reciprocating - ask to see what apps the new person uses, or what electronic devices are in his setup. Perhaps we can learn something too – e.g., I really enjoy using my Seestar even though it is a new way of observing for me. Even if we don't, the new person may feel more welcome if they can show us tips and tools too, so there is a balance to the relationship instead of a teacher-student dynamic.

New observers may also be intimidated by the equipment or social situations. Approach them with a smile and try to see things from their view. Others may be gregarious and want to talk a lot about different aspects of the hobby or may just want to talk. And remember, you must cast a wide net and very few people will stick with the hobby and / or the club. That's OK if we are not ripping the net open by ignoring potential members, demeaning them by pointing out their lack of skills or scaring them with proselytizing.

> Your old road is rapidly agin'
> Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand
> For the times they are a-changin'
> The Times They Are A-Changin'– Bob Dylan

Some amateur astronomers seem to have been around since they ground their own telescope mirrors and borrowed Galileo's eyepiece and can be set in their ways. I've seen this movie before with people complaining about new methods from the switch of visual to film, heard film users decry digital imaging and listened to complaints about electronic go-to and push to systems. You may have enjoyed the old ways or think they are better, but that ship has sailed.

Astronomy for amateurs is intended to be what the person wants it to be. Helping a new amateur find what excites them can be a rewarding experience for both parties. This may include new technology or delaying learning some fundamentals. However, telling them they must learn all the constellations and be able to star hop is not going to promote a hobby that is already expensive and complicated to begin with. If you would like to discuss ideas about retaining members (and specifically drawing a younger crowd), contact me.

Epilogue

Look for my article "Sketching all the NGC Objects" in the March issue of Reflector Magazine, published by the Astronomical League.

Searching for an image of an old man shaking his cane led me to this oldie but goodie meme; a perfect one for amateur astronomers.

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.

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