
VIA STELLARIS

The Monthly Newsletter of the Von Braun Astronomical Society

VBAS Highlights for January

Public Programs for January

Our next member's meeting will be held on Friday, January 16th at 7 PM. The program this month will be by Observatories Director Wesley Swift titled, *Basic Telescope Optics and Math*. As a follow-up to his recent program on telescope selection, former president and avid observer Jeff Delmas also plans to lead a hands-on workshop for any new telescope owners who need help setting up their new scope. VBAS Member Meetings are held on the 3rd Friday of each month at 7 PM; they're open to the public and are free.

Regular planetarium programs are held on Saturdays at 7:30 PM. This month, we explain how telescopes work with three family-friendly shows on January 3rd, 10th, and 24th. On the 17th, we will give a seasonal sky tour. On the 31st, we will have a technical program to be announced.

President's Message: State of the Society

by John Young

This past year was an eventful and productive period for our Society. With history's inevitable link to the future, I thought it best to take a thorough look at the highlights of 2008 as, along with steps in some new directions, they will undoubtedly replay their roles in shaping much of the coming year.

One of the more significant changes that took place early in the year was moving from a public planetarium show schedule of one to two Saturday evenings per month to every Saturday... and some months have five! Related efforts have continued as well, including dynamic day and evening outreach events to students of public, private, parochial, and homeschool groups both at VBAS and at recipient facilities. Additionally, our long-standing outreach commitment to the US Space and Rocket Center, the Hayes Nature Preserve, and Scout groups was upheld in fine fashion. We also hosted combination meetings – shows for other local interest groups including HAAS, the Sierra Club, and Mensa. Sorry to say I missed our biggest and most multi-faceted outreach event of the year, the fall Astronomy Day. Through conversation with participants, pictures, and the subsequent newsletter article I understand that it was indeed a big hit as always.

Swinging the scope from outreach to more Society and member-centric highlights, what stands out most is the increased participation in member events like the annual Messier Marathon and Eric Johnson's Volunteer State Star Party. I would gather that much of this owed to the fact that over 30 new members were added in 2008. I honestly can't think of a better way to spend a clear, dark night than to be outdoors with friends observing and studying the mysteries of the small dim objects that oftentimes lead us to contemplate the realities

of the bigger and brighter facets of our own lives and our home planet. These gatherings afforded both. Our meetings this past year were relatively well-attended and we were fortunate to not only have some terrific guest speakers like Jonathan Campbell, Wes Colley and Jack Fix, but also some very informative and practical presentations from folks like our own Mitzi Adams, Jeff Delmas, Walt Langley, Wes Swift, Richard Norman and Andy Wilson. We were also honored to host a meeting of some of our founding and early members that laid VBAS' foundations over a half-century ago. Unfortunately our eldest founding member, Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger, was unable to attend due to failing health. As many of you know, he passed away the following month on May 25th at the age of 94. Several members recently participated in a recognition symposium in his honor and Society members also contributed \$300 to the UAH von Braun Scholarship as a memoriam.

The Society maintains a solid financial position through a consistent membership base, outreach programs, and prudent stewardship of assets. We have recently joined the Huntsville-Madison County Chamber of Commerce to strengthen bonds with our civic partners. Inoperable HVAC units were replaced in our library and planetarium spaces – the latter was a rather considerable outlay, but it will undoubtedly ensure the comfort of members and visitors alike for years to come. Gena Crook led a successful series of planetarium training sessions for those interested in presenting our shows. Observing programs for both adult and youth members have been reconstituted by two of our newest board members – student director David Lofts and resident astronomer Doug Horacek. Restoration efforts on the Swanson 21" reflecting telescope have progressed slowly but surely by a small, dedicated group led by Jeff Delmas, and its dome received much-needed refinishing and paint through a team effort led by our new facilities director, Terry Owens. This was just in

time for our Astronomy Day and a visit by a German film production crew working on a von Braun documentary a few weeks later. Those that know me well can rest assured that if space allowed I would take another page or two to recognize each person that has contributed towards the Society's betterment.

What will carry our Society well in the coming year is much of what I've described in the preceding paragraphs. If one takes a closer look it is evident that the success of our Society is less a fortuitous event and more a team effort and labor of love for many. There is definitely something to be said for personally-attained goals and growth in amateur astronomy. However, whether it be one, two, or twenty – learning and sharing at a planetarium show or observing event, rolling up the sleeves at a project work party, or simply gathering at a meeting to reacquaint ourselves with one an-

other and our home on the mountain is what it's all about.

On that note, key projects and events for the coming year include: increasing membership involvement and retention through survey and subsequent action plans; fundraising, construction kick-off, and possible completion of the facilities addition; structural repair of the Angele observatory; acquisition of an improved planetarium celestial projector; and return to service of the Swanson 21" telescope. Oh, for those who didn't already know 2009 is the International Year of Astronomy, so needless to say we're going to have some fun along the way!

Best wishes for peace and prosperity in the New Year.

John Young
VBAS President

The Student's Corner

Gold Stars for the Junior Observers Group

by David Lofts

The junior observers group made a great running start when it met in October and November. We took a break in December because of Christmas. Our next session will be January the 30th.

The focus of the first session was to learn and locate constellations. Junior observers were shown a slideshow of some easily seen constellations and the same constellations on the dome. The observers were then taken outside to observe the constellations. The sky was clear and the weather was perfect for observing the sky that night. I did not quite know what to expect at the first session, but Werner Von Braun said, "Research is what you do when you don't know what you are doing," so you could say that quite a bit of research was made on this subject.

In the second session we focused on drawing constellations. Quite a few new people showed up for the next session. We reviewed the constellations from last session and learned how to use a star chart. The observers were then taught how to draw constellations and went outside to stargaze. No one was prepared for the weather, so stargazing did not last as long! It was so cold we needed coats, but almost no one brought one. Some more people wanted to come back and even signed up.

The junior observers should go outside and observe the stars for at least a few minutes each night and get a good handle of the night sky. I encourage the young observers to be at the planetarium at seven o'clock on the 30th of January for the next session. Due to cold weather, observing is optional. So if you want to observe, bring a coat. See you then!

Saturday, January 3rd, 10th, 24th, & 31st, 2009, 7:30 PM

Planetarium Show: *Telescopes: Eyes on the Universe*

Location: VBAS

Telescopes allow us to directly experience the universe and to better understand it. From Galileo's first reports of the phases of Venus to evidence of

Friday, January 30th, 2009, 7-9 PM

Youth Observing Session

Location: VBAS

Presented by David Lofts

This evening will focus on constellations in the planetarium dome. If the children are dressed for the cold, there will be a short outdoor observing session after the show to identify constellations for their Sky Puppy certificates, possibly viewing through the C16, possibly another scope or two; however, due to the lack of interest in observing in the cold last time we will stress the indoor program. Some materials for limiting magnitude for Ursa Minor and Orion will be handed out. Call Doug Horacek at 772-6788 or David Lofts at 726-0275 for more information.

Saturday, February 7th, 14th, & 28th, 2009, 7:30 PM

Planetarium Show: Galileo

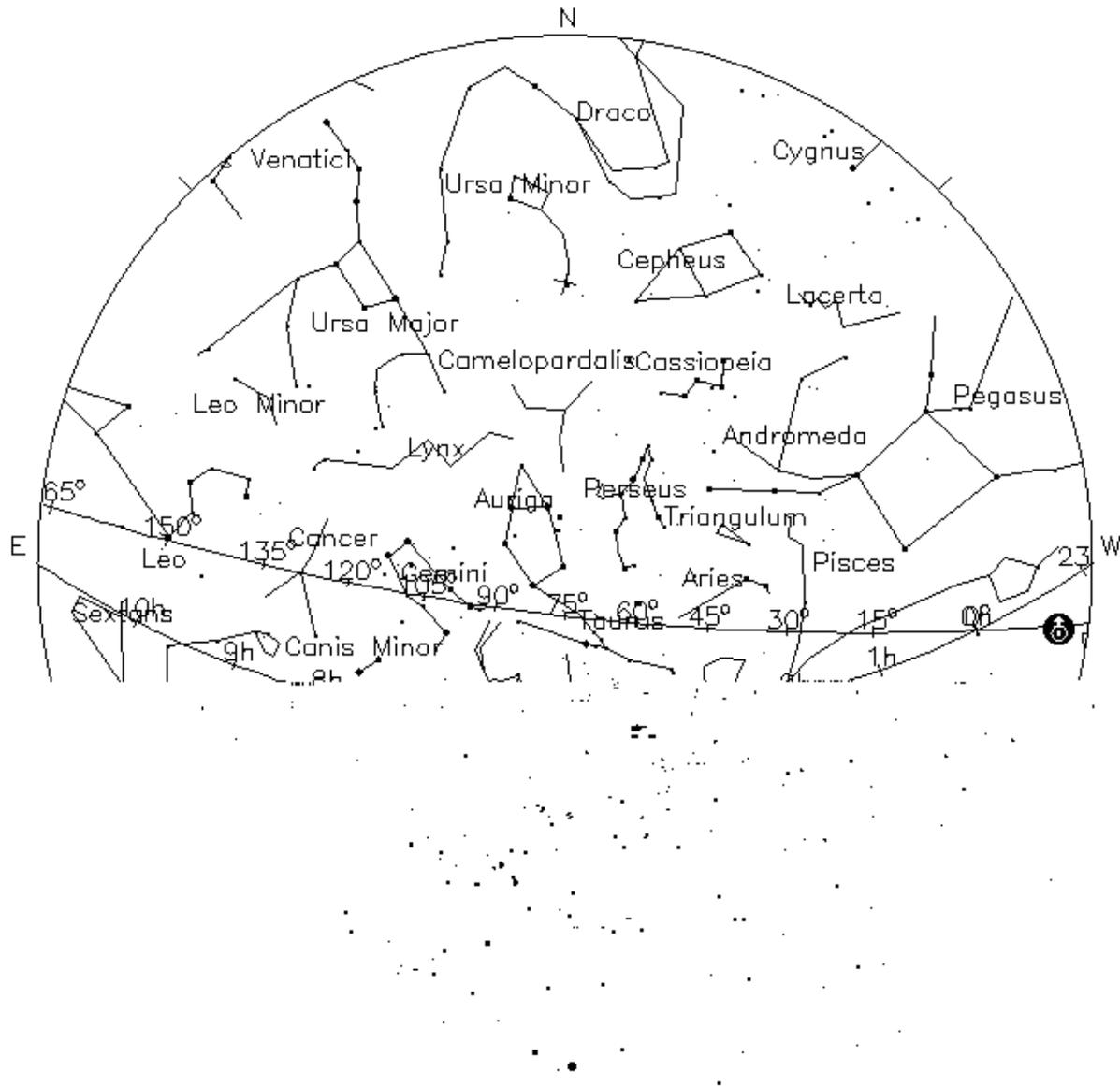
Location: VBAS

2009 is the International Year of Astronomy, celebrating the 400th anniversary of when Galileo became the first man to turn a telescope to the

The Night Sky for January, 2009

Here is the view at 9 PM in mid January, 2009, at 34° N Latitude, 86° W Longitude.

Map courtesy of John Walker and YourSky (<http://www.fourmilab.to/yoursky/>).



The Quadrantid Meteor Shower

by Doug Horacek, Resident Astronomer

The Maximum for the Quadrantid Meteor Shower was the morning of 3 January 2009. You still might see some meteors in the early morning. The name Quadrantid come from the obsolete constellation Quadrans Muralis, which is now Boötes. The radiant point is be-

tween Hercules, Draco and Boötes. The object associated with the meteor shower is 2003 EH1, which is an asteroid, also thought to be the remnant of comet C/1490 Y1 observed by Chinese, Japanese and Korean Astronomers 500 years ago. If you missed the 3 January peak that is OK; you still may see some in the early January skies.

VBAS Draft Board Meeting Minutes

7 PM on Tuesday, December 2, 2008

Attendees:

James Brelsford, Ethan Chew, Jeff Delmas, Doug Horacek, Cassie Lofts, David Lofts, Terry Owens, Steve Sloan, John Young

The meeting was called to order by President John Young at 7:12 p.m. Approving the October 20th board meeting minutes was discussed, and some corrections were suggested. Terry moved to approve the minutes as amended. Jeff seconded, and the motion carried.

Approval of the Treasurer's Report was postponed, pending answers to questions that were discussed.

What's the next step for facilities addition fundraising? How can we help in a measured way? So far, Jeff has received a total of \$3950 in corporate donations from four companies, and almost \$2K in private donations. John and Jeff compiled a list of companies to check after the holidays. We have about \$53K set aside for facilities improvements so far, out of the roughly \$125K we need. We have a yearly grant report due to NASA in March. John asked if we've looked into loans -- we haven't yet. Terry asked about possibly scaling down what we want to build. Jeff responded that we already have. John asked about city, county, or state help. That's on Jeff's list to check. If the city annexes the park, they can put in a sewer at the VBAS facilities, which would be good for us. Will we be meeting with recently elected Mayor Battle soon? John suggested looking into Wal-Mart, CSC, Tim Perry's contacts, and historic donors. (For example, Wyle gave the first planetarium projector.) Jeff will send out his list of possible donors with instructions for feedback.

A draft of the upcoming membership survey was reviewed. James suggested attaching the survey to our upcoming renewal notices. Jeff strongly recommended compressing the survey into a single page front-and-back, or it will get thrown in the trash. Steve is good at cramming things onto a page, so he'll take a crack at it. There was more discussion. If we combine the membership renewal and survey, we'll probably wait until the February time frame to send. Sending the membership renewal reminder any earlier would make it easier for people to forget to renew.

The Stuhlinger Symposium was successful, although attendance was a little thin.

Our membership roster was submitted to the Astronomical League. We paid \$630 for VBAS members to keep AL memberships. Gerry is getting better in his Astronomical League liaison role.

Tom Burleson, Jr, and Skeet Vaughn volunteered to help with the upcoming audit.

The Huntsville Public Library partnership is Walt Langley's baby. He met with David Lilly and Rebecca at the library. The three of them would like to build a little observatory on the library roof, with a small goto scope with a CCD camera they can pipe into the building, for use in classes. VBAS would help set it up and train at least one library person to use it. VBAS will contribute our expertise in an ongoing relationship. It would cost the library about \$15-20K. We're waiting on their decision.

We need strategic planning on the short term (this year), medium term (2-5 years), and long term. Short term planning is needed, because events must be planned more than 1-2 months in advance to allow publicity. An email will be sent to the board. Jeff will get together with each board member to discuss.

Despite our discussions about joining the Chamber of Commerce, we have so far failed to join, but we will join soon. We need to really take advantage of it. Some of their events aren't free, so we'll need a budget line item prepared for those expenses.

It would be good for the Nominating Committee for 2009 to get rolling as early as possible. The committee members must be selected by the January member and board meetings.

We have made decisions about who can use VBAS checks, but we need to develop a list of people who can use the credit card. John recommended that the same people who are authorized to spend more than \$250 should also have access to the credit card. John moved that the list of people authorized to use the credit card must mirror the list of officers who can sign checks. (That means that the President, Vice President, Treasurer, and Director of Facilities will be the only ones authorized to use the credit card.) Jeff seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Jeff moved to adjourn. The motion passed. The meeting adjourned at 8:58 p.m.

Contributions to Via Stellaris

We welcome contributions to our newsletter that may be of interest to the astronomical community. Contributions are best sent by email to Steve Sloan at editor1@vbas.org. If you don't have access to email, you can send articles in either Word or ASCII format to Steve at 2110 Vilaret Dr, Huntsville, AL 35803.

Membership and Renewal

The VBAS currently has four categories of membership. All four include free admission to the planetarium shows; subscription to this newsletter; membership in the Astronomical League; and use of VBAS library and equipment. The four categories of membership, and the dues for each, are: REGULAR at \$24.00 per year, FAMILY at \$36.00 per year, STUDENT (must be full-time student) at \$12.00 per year, and LIFE at \$500.00. Newsletter Only is also available for \$12.00 per year. Membership renewal occurs for all members annually on March 1st.

All VBAS memberships will come up for renewal on March 1, 2009. If you have questions regarding membership, please contact Gerry Conrad.

Please send your renewal to the Membership Secretary at VBAS, P.O. Box 1142, Huntsville, AL 35807. Make checks payable to the Von Braun Astronomical Society. If your mailing or email address changes, please report the new address promptly to the Membership Secretary, Gerry Conrad, at conrad1908@knology.net or 722-8212, to avoid missing issues of *Via Stellaris*.

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Steve Sloan, Via Stellaris editor