



VBAS Highlights for October

Public Programs for October

Our next member's meeting will be held on Friday, October 17th at 7 PM. Our own Richard Norman will present a Night Sky Network webinar program that he participated in: "Our Holiday Snaps of Saturn" by Dr. John Weiss of the CICLOPS/Space Science Institute. The webinar will introduce breathtaking images of Saturn from the Cassini Mission, and talk about the dynamics of rings in our Solar System. 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 continue a year-long series on the planets and other bodies of our Solar System with three family-friendly shows on Comets and Kuiper Belt Objects, on October 4th, 11th, and 25th. On the 18th, Barb Cohen will present a planetarium program about the Mars Exploration Rovers. Admission to planetarium shows is free for VBAS Members, \$5.00 for Adults, \$3.00 for Students, and free for children under 6. Observation of the night sky through various telescopes normally follows each planetarium program, weather permitting.

President's Message

On page 2, VBAS president John Young writes about transition and recognition.

Late October Meteor Showers

Resident Astronomer Doug Horacek informs us about this month's upcoming meteor showers on page 3.

The Student's Corner

On page 5, Student Director David Lofts reports on the VBAS Junior Observers Group we're setting up in conjunction with Astronomical League clubs.

Astronomy Day

Melissa Snider and Doug Horacek review this year's Astronomy Day, with pictures by Gena Crook and Jeff Delmas, starting on page 6.

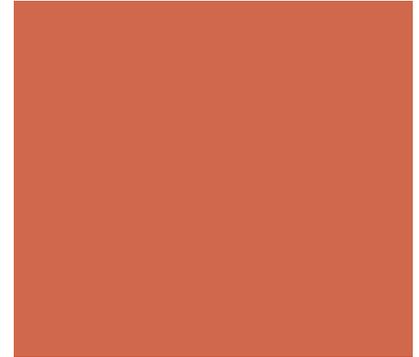
Worldwide Star Count Event

On page 8, Richard Norman informs us about the upcoming Dark Sky event our Junior Observer's Group will be joining on Halloween night.

HATS Person of the Year Dinner

Jeff Delmas reports on last month's Huntsville Association of Technical Societies (HATS) annual Professional of the Year dinner, where VBAS nominated Melissa Snider. See page 9 for details.

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President's Message

by John Young

The themes of this month's message are transition and recognition.

The transition has come recently in two forms. The first, of course, is Summer's inevitable yield of warm and humid days (and often-times nights) to the cooler and drier days of Fall. With a focused and well-manned restoration effort taking place on our historic Swanson 21" reflector, the upcoming VSSP star party, and the kick-off of our new junior observers program later this month, I'd say the timing of this "cool" transition is perfect. I know I'm looking forward to it as I have plans to spend some quality time with the Herschel 400!

The second transition that has recently taken place is the VBAS board's approval of Terry Owens as our Director of Facilities and Equipment. In addition to taking on the role of librarian recently, Terry has accomplished a number of projects of increasing importance to the Society since becoming a member in the past year. These include donating and installing a pulser for the C16 Telrad, constructing an attractive, sturdy, and useful easel for the planetarium, and repairing the Angele front door. Her most recent, and undoubtedly most visible contribution, was leading the Swanson dome painting effort. Terry succeeded Eric Peterson who recently resigned due to increasing personal and professional demands on his time. Thanks for your service to the Society Eric.

Whether with family, friends, coworkers, or a group like VBAS - recognition is an important part of any relationship. Saying thanks for a job well done is a great way to let people know they're appreciated. On that note, I'd like to extend my personal thanks and admiration to the officers and members of VBAS. When I look at the time and energy that a number of you regularly give to the good of the group, Society, and community I am impressed and humbled as I know it must surely add up

to hundreds of hours each year. That same thanks and appreciation goes out to those of you with schedules that limit your Society involvement to stopping by, helping out, or attending one of our events when time permits - it's definitely a team effort and it's always good to see each of you!

Finally, I'd like to specifically mention that our Education and Programs Director, Melissa Snider, was recently selected as VBAS' recipient of the Huntsville Association of Technical Societies' Professional of the Year award. The POY dinner was held at the US Space and Rocket Center on September 9th and was attended by over 200 members of area societies. Congratulations Melissa!

Clear skies to all,

John G. Young
VBAS President

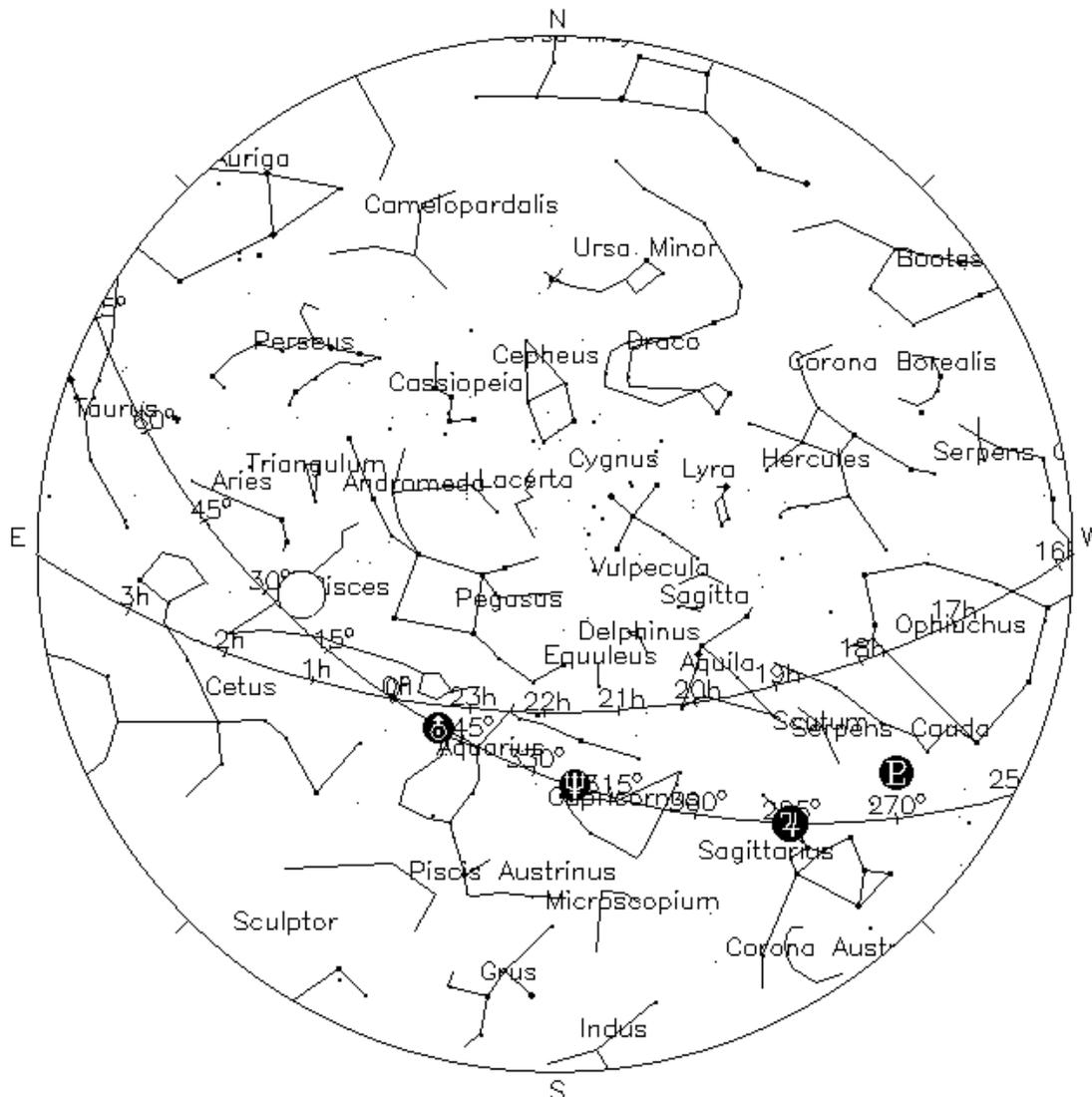


In honor of Halloween, the Witch Head Nebula (Image credit & copyright: Rick Krejci, RicksAstro Astrophotography)

The Night Sky for October, 2008

Here is the view at 9 PM in mid October, 2008, at 34° N Latitude, 86° W Longitude. Jupiter (the "4"-like symbol) will be to the west in Sagittarius. The outer planets, Uranus (ball and up arrow symbol), Neptune (trident symbol), and Pluto ("PL" symbol) will also be high in the sky, and visible through a telescope.

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



Late October Meteor Showers

by Doug Horacek, Resident Astronomer

Since there will be some observing during the later part of the month, I have some information about some of the meteor showers that will be active later in the month. The major meteor shower that will be active over the weekend of 24 October 2008 is the Orionid meteor shower. The peak of

this shower is 21 October 2008, so observers on the weekend of the 24th will observe meteors past its prime evening. Also, on the weekend of the 24th, on the morning of 25 October 2008, just past the prime of the Leo Minorid shower, people can look for meteors radiating from Leo Minor, just above Leo in the sky. The Orionid shower is associated with Halley's comet, and there is no known comet associated with Leo Minorids.

VBAS Calendar of Events

Friday, October 3rd, 2008, Setup at 6 PM

Regular Observing Evening for Adults

Location: **VBAS**

Presented by **Doug Horacek**

For more information call Doug at 772-6788.

Saturday, October 4th, 11th, & 25th, 2008, 7:30 PM

Planetarium Show: *Icy Outcasts: Exploring Comets and Kuiper Belt Objects (KBOs)*

Join us for a family-friendly program to explore what lies in the outer icy regions of our Solar System, in the VBAS Planetarium as part of our year-long exploration of our Solar System! Weather permitting, we'll be viewing the night sky afterwards through one or more of VBAS's powerful telescopes, too.



The Dust and Ion Tails of Comet Hale-Bopp. (Image credit: John Gleason, Celestial Images)



The relative sizes of the largest trans-Neptunian objects as compared to Earth. (Image credit: NASA, updated by Wikimedia Commons)

Friday, October 17th, 2008, 7 PM

Regular Monthly Meeting

After a short pizza social and marketplace swap meet we'll discuss pertinent society business before moving on to our program. Richard Norman will present a Night Sky Network webinar program that he participated in: "Our Holiday Snaps of Saturn" by Dr. John Weiss of the CICLOPS/Space Science Institute. The webinar will introduce breathtaking images of Saturn from the Cassini

Mission, and talk about the dynamics of rings in our Solar System. Come out and learn about this interesting topic and, as always, visitors are welcome to our members' meetings.

Saturday, October 18th & 25th, 2008, 3:30-5:30 PM

Planetarium Presenter Training Session

Training includes operation of the star projector and other audio-visual equipment, set-up and operation of the VBAS solar telescopes, and an introduction to the curriculum materials provided by the Night Sky Network.

Saturday, October 18th, 2008, 7:30 PM

Planetarium Show: *Mars Exploration Rovers*

Presented by **Barb Cohen**

The two Mars Exploration Rovers touched down on Mars in January 2004, and despite exceeding their warranties many times over, and showing signs of wear and tear, they are still conducting groundbreaking science. The scientific goals of these robot geologists are to search for and characterize a wide range of rocks and soils that may hold clues to past water activity on Mars. Weather permitting, we'll be viewing the night sky afterwards through one or more of VBAS's powerful telescopes, too.

Friday October 24 - Saturday October 25, 2008

Fifth Annual Volunteer State Star Party

Location: **Meriwether Lewis Observatory Dark Sky Site, Summertown, Tennessee**

Presented by **Eric Johnson**

VBAS member Eric Johnson is opening up his dark sky site in Southern Tennessee for a weekend of observing, good food, and plenty of hospitality. The site is in Lewis County, Tennessee, between Hohenwald and Summertown. This is a very dark sky site, as people found out last year under crystal clear skies. Primitive camping and facilities are on site. It is free to all astronomers near and far. Don't forget your scope. RSVP Eric Johnson at ejohnso4@yahoo.com.

Friday, October 31st, 2008, 7 PM

Youth Observing Evening

Location: **VBAS**

Presented by **Doug Horacek**

The youth observing evening includes estimating the darkness of the sky using Cygnus the Swan or the Northern Cross. For more information call Doug at 772-6788.

...And as always, for the most up-to-date information about VBAS events, be sure to check the web site at vbas.org.

The Student's Corner: VBAS Junior Observers Group

by David Lofts

Finally! We are now starting a junior observers group! Children 7-10 years old will participate in the Sky Puppies, and students 11 and up can participate in a range of observing groups. The details are listed on the junior observers group working plan provided below. All of the materials are from the Astronomical League.

We are starting this observers group because there has been no observers group for kids. To be a Sky Puppy member you must be 7-10 years old. The Sky Puppy member starts by piggy-backing on the Friday night observing sessions at the Von Braun Astronomical Society. Friday nights are best because they have no church or school the next day. Each student must have a responsible adult with them at all times. It is recommended that a Sky Puppy member have a club manual (can be purchased from www.astroleague.org), a notebook without lines (can be purchased at Waldenbooks in the Parkway Place mall or at Mike's Merchandise Bargain Store near Weatherly road on the South Parkway), a pencil, and a pair of binoculars.



Sky Puppy students must:

- Describe, identify, and draw 15 IAU constellations
- Learn the difference between an asterism and a constellation
- Be able to tell at least two stories implied by the constellation
- Learn how to read a planisphere
- And be able to use a pair of binoculars to locate five deep space objects

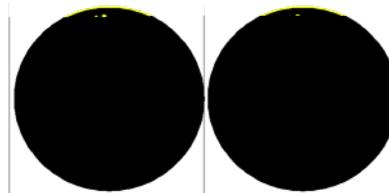
Students 11 and up can pick from a range of observing groups based on their experience and

interest. Some of the observing groups are listed below:

- *Universe Sampler* (recommended for beginners) has twelve tutorials on how to observe the night sky. The observing list covers double stars, variable stars, star clusters, nebulae and galaxies.



- *Constellation Hunters* must recognize and draw 39 IAU constellations in a log book.



- *Lunar Observers* must observe 100 features on the moon (18 naked eye, 46 binocular, 36 telescopic).



More advanced programs:

Planetary Nebulae, Galaxy Groups and Clusters, Globular Clusters, Messier Club, Herschel 400

Awards are available through the Astronomical League if all projects are completed and documented successfully.

To get started, click on the picture of David Lofts at www.VBAS.org.

Astronomy Day 2008

*Text by Melissa Snider, with contributions from Doug Horacek
Photos by Gena Crook and Jeff Delmas*

September 27 was the perfect Autumn day for Astronomy Day! VBAS members and volunteers hosted a fun-filled day of free activities, tours and planetarium programs for all ages. All told, about 250 people came out to enjoy VBAS hospitality and learn about the stars. About 25 people gave their time and talents to ensure the day's success!



Special guest author Roger Reid was on hand with Publicity Director Gena Crook selling copies of his new book *Space*, a young readers' mystery set in Monte Sano State Park (with a couple of thrilling scenes in the Swanson Observatory). He has donated \$100 to VBAS from book sales at Astronomy Day.

Lonnie Puterbaugh's The Astronomy Channel drew a steady crowd from 11 am to 10 pm. Viewers were treated to 3D tours of Mars and excellent discussion of all things astronomy, led by Lonnie and his student assistant, Kayla La-France.

The planetarium saw about 120 visitors during the day, and another 120 for evening programs. From 11 am to 4:30 pm, Planetarium Director Roy Young and Volunteer Presenter James

Brelsford shared our historic planetarium dome and projector with about 20 people every hour. Many came back for more than one show. A new crowd came for Roger Reid's 6 pm presentation and VBAS volunteer James Hopkins' show "Back to the Moon, this Time to Stay." We received lots of great compliments on these and our regular Saturday night programs.

In the Swanson and Angele observatories, Resident Astronomer Doug Horacek and his team were busy all day and night. Research/Planning Director Jeff Delmas, Vice President Jared Cassidy, Librarian/Facilities Director Terry Owens, and volunteers Richard Norman, JC Carpenter, Eduardo Mendoza and Ashley Campbell offered tours of both observatories and (when the clouds parted) wowed guests with views of the Sun through the Stuhlinger and the Coronado scopes. The scopes remained open at night, with Ethan Chew joining the observing crew. Somehow the clouds parted just long enough for evening guests to get a great view of several Messier objects, the double star cluster in Perseus Albireo – thanks, Doug for the great weather! Honored guest Gert Schmitz shared the rich history and lore of the club and the research done by its founding members.





Test firings of HAL-5's Suitcase Rocket added some sizzle to the day.



Doug Horacek has sent details about what he and Ethan observed with his telescope, an f/4.5 16-inch Meade Light Bridge. They were able to see M100, M32, and M31 in the same field of view. Doug showed the brighter and larger M31 to the crowd. He showed both clusters of the double cluster in Perseus in the same field of view. While there were clouds in the east, Ethan pointed Doug's telescope to Alberio, and later, Ethan put it on Herschel's Garnet Star. Jeff and the folks on the 21 inch managed to image the Ring Nebula with the CCD camera.

The field was abuzz with activity and learning all day. Volunteer Jerrie Hopkins was on her feet all day, entertaining guests and making sure they didn't miss our special planetarium shows. With a 15-foot high Shuttle centerpiece from NASA MSFC for inspiration, young visitors flocked to the U.S. Space & Rocket Center's fizzy rockets and HAL-5's straw rocket table.

Student Director David Lofts shared an admirable hands-on optics table, assisted by presenter Cassie Lofts. They seemed to generate a lot of interest in our Young Observer's Group, which begins meeting on October 31.



Continued on page 8 

Many residents of Monte Sano and surrounding areas took an active interest in Richard Norman's Dark Sky/Night Sky displays. Glare and light trespass seem to be on everyone's mind these days: at least 5 families vowed to install night sky lighting at home and call their local utility provider to fit shields over their streetlights.

Our new polo shirts and newly restocked t's and planispheres were hot sellers at the merchandise table. Many thanks to Doshia Wilson who restocked and operated the gift shop, and Mike McKannan who assisted at the merchandise table and provided first aid services.

The Hopkins family scored big at Eduardo Mendoza's trivia table, along with the Lukins family who won a family membership through March 2009. Savory grilled burgers, hot dogs and veggie burgers sizzled all day at former Fogcutter chef Jim Bowker's grill. The merchandise, food and trivia proceeds help raise awareness of our programs and move us closer to being able to afford construction of our new restroom addition.

In addition to all the volunteers in the public eye, others provided steady support behind the scenes to set up, keep the event moving, and pack up at the end when everyone else was too tired to move. Special thanks to presenter Megan Beattie, Administrative Director Ethan Chew and volunteer Yohon Lo of HAL-5, who cheerfully toted heavy supplies, set up and packed up tents, and ran countless errands for last-minute items. Publicity Director Gena

Crook spread the word so far and wide that even Big Spring Jam and the Dog Fair couldn't put a dent in our attendance! Thanks, also to NASA MSFC (via Roy Young) for providing beautiful take-home lithographs and posters from the Chandra, Shuttle and Ares programs.

Every year, Astronomy Day gets a little bigger and runs a little more smoothly. Events like this are essential to keep astronomy in the public eye, and the dedicated volunteers and staff of VBAS are essential to our continued success. Thank you all for a fantastic day!

World Wide Star Count Event

by Richard Norman

From October 20 to November 3, the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research is hosting an International Citizen Science Event to raise awareness of light pollution and astronomy. Like last year, they will be using the constellation Cygnus, and they will collect results from citizen scientists from all of the world on their web site: <http://www.starcount.org>

All the information you need to participate is on the web site. The VBAS Student Director and the Resident Astronomer will be hosting a youth observing event (see details in the Calendar of Events) on October 31st, and will be including the star count among the activities.

Congratulations VBAS Professional Of the Year Melissa Snider

by Jeff Delmas

On September 9, the Huntsville Association of Technical Societies (HATS) held its annual Professional of the Year dinner. As a HATS founding member, VBAS participated and presented Melissa Snider as our nominee. In addition to the VBAS members at our table, we also hosted Challenger Middle School teacher Annette Perkins, who along with VBAS member and teacher Beth Bero are among this year's recipients of a HATS STEDTRAIN grant for science and math education.

When it comes to fulfilling the VBAS mission of education and public outreach, Melissa Snider exemplifies the qualities needed in an individual to realize the organization's lofty goals. Melissa has been a member of VBAS for 8 years, focusing her efforts on the planetarium and educational aspects of the organization. As a new member, she took training on operating the planetarium projector system and was soon assisting and then leading planetarium shows for the public and for school children. She's a past

membership secretary of the organization and she's currently our Director of Education and Programs. In this capacity, she's set a standard of excellence that future directors will aspire to achieve.

At VBAS, Melissa is one of a dedicated group of planetarium operators and supporters, and in many ways, Melissa represents the excellent contribution to our organization and to our community as a whole that every member of that team makes. And despite her outstanding abilities and contributions to the leadership of our organization, Melissa seems to be at her best when presenting the wonders of the night sky to a group of children, or leading members from the audience, young and old, in a dance around the planetarium projector to learn first-hand about the phases of the Moon. Please join me in congratulating Melissa Snider, our VBAS Professional of the Year!



HATS POY Dinner (l to r): Jeff Delmas, Beth Bero, Melissa Snider, Ron Schwertfeger, Annette Perkins, Terry Owens

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 came up for renewal on March 1, 2008. 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