

WRAPPING IT ALL UP

Final Thoughts from the Author

Amateur astronomy is surely one of those activities that qualifies for consideration as a 'life long' pursuit. The learning curve, while it flattens out with experience, goes on and up forever. No matter how much you learn, do, and see as an amateur astronomer, there's plenty more where that came from. And while it is certainly possible to hit a limit for a given telescope aperture size, this may take some doing. The 8" Newtonian I use at the time of this writing, for example, has light grasp enough to bring the images of more than 80,000 deep sky objects to my eyes and my mind. If I manage to view 150 such objects each year that I use this telescope I will need to live more than 533 years. Or, to look at it another way, to see them all in what is likely to be the time I have left (given average life expectancy in the United States) I would need to view 2,667 object every year. If you want a hobby that offers unlimited possibilities, you've come to the right place! To say that this program sponsored by the TAAA is merely the beginning of what could be a *life long pursuit* would be a fantastical understatement.

And a first step is really all this program represents. The lists of objects provided with the text of the workbook are no more than a representative samplings of the wonders available to the amateur astronomer, and are anything *but* comprehensive. Nor is this program itself comprehensive in terms of the multifaceted nature of the hobby. No attempt is made to cover such topics as comet hunting, variable star observing, occultation timing, or astrophotography, to name a few. The aim of this program is to move you beyond that feeling of "Now what?" that first time telescope owners sometimes experience; the topics and observing activities included in the BSIG workbook are intended to provide the sort of experience that allows you to move on into these more specialized activities in the future.

This is also not a comprehensive manual for amateur astronomers. The tips and tricks included are only those that might have a specific application for the subject at hand. There are many ways to approach astronomical observation, and no attempt has been made here to cover the field. At the end of each portion of the workbook are recommended references, some of which are repeated throughout. These books *do* cover the field, and are well worth the investment. For those of you who are brand new to amateur astronomy, I would like to add my personal recommendation for two books in particular:

- *Nightwatch* by Terence Dickinson. This book combines basic and useful information with star charts containing objects recommended for smaller telescopes. This book was a major influence on the subject matter and objects selected for this program. If you have not yet purchased a basic book on amateur astronomy, go find a copy of *Nightwatch*. You will not be sorry.
- *Astronomy Hacks* by Thompson and Thompson. If you own a Newtonian reflector, especially one on a Dobsonian mount, you *need* this book. Although

the authors have a pronounced 'dob bias' the book is also full of advice on techniques that work regardless of telescope type, and so is recommended now matter how you observe. It is a nice compliment to *Nightwatch*.

Of all the changes that have taken place in the world of amateur astronomy in the past thirty years – since I was an amateur astronomer in my teens – absolutely nothing has had a larger impact than the internet. Its value as a resource is incalculable, as are its pitfalls. It can be very difficult to sort out fact from forcefully present opinions and thinly veiled sales pitches. Navigate the internet with care and be prepared to take some things with a grain of salt, but do delve into the web for information on astronomy. As with books, I have some favorites to recommend:

- *Cloudy Nights Telescope Reviews* is a website that combines reviews of telescopes, eyepieces, accessories, books, and software with articles on observing techniques as well as objects to observe. The reviews are written by amateur astronomers such as yourselves. Associated with this website is an online forum of the same name, a global community of enthusiasts known for their willingness to assist fellow amateur astronomers and for a style of moderation that makes it safe for families and young people to explore. Well worth investigating.
- *Sky and Telescope* has a website on which you can find the latest news from the world of astronomy, tips on observing, and information on what is up there from night to night for your viewing pleasure.
- *Impressions of the Deep Sky* is a treasure trove of sketches made by a Finnish amateur astronomer, all of them made from observations through modest telescopes. The value of this site is the realistic renditions of these objects, which will give you a much clearer idea of what you are likely to see through the eyepiece than most popular astronomy books (which tend to be a bit over illustrated) provide.
- *Tucson Amateur Astronomy Association...* What? Didn't know we had a website? This is the place to go if you need to double check matters astronomical in the Tucson area.

These are only a few of the great many websites out there worth exploring. When you can't get out to observe, there's always the internet. Explore with a healthy dose of skepticism, and when you find something good, let us know about it!

Writing this program and compiling the lists has been a lot of fun. And that is as it should be. This is a hobby, after all, and the bottom line is that we pursue amateur astronomy because we *want to* and not because it is required of us. I sincerely hope that those of you who take up this program have at least as much fun working it as I have had writing it!

Tom Watson
On behalf of the BSIG Committee
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