

IceInSpace AstroCamp 2007

The timing couldn't have been better – Comet McNaught, three clear nights and a gathering of over 150 stargazers under dark skies. By **Mike Salway**

MEMBERS AND GUESTS OF THE ICEIN-SPACE WEB FORUM gathered together at IISAC2007 for three nights over January 18th – 21st at Lostock, in the beautiful dark skies of the Hunter Valley.

IISAC2007 was the second IISAC (IceInSpace Astro Camp) event organised by IceInSpace, after a successful IISAC2006 in January last year (*AS&T*: April 2006, page 78). The date for IISAC2007 had been set for almost 12 months and as it turned out, the timing couldn't have been better with Comet McNaught at arguably its best over the three nights of the star party. Imagine over 100 stargazers, lined up on the top of a mountain with tripods, cameras and binoculars at the ready and all facing west, waiting for what was to be an amazing, awe-inspiring view of the brightest comet in over 40 years. More on that later.

Hot days were expected and after last year we knew how hot it could get. There was no mistake there – it was very hot again as the mercury exploded to over 35°C each day. The water hole was again a blessing, allowing the group to revive and recuperate during those hot days. Kids and adults alike enjoyed the cool and shaded water and the waterhole became a great meeting place to catch up

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The mountainous terrain provided a great backdrop for the setting Comet McNaught.

An eyeful of comet dust! A group shot at the top of Mount Disappointment combined with a 90 second exposure of Comet McNaught.



and chat about the previous night.

I arrived early on Thursday morning to begin the long preparations, with most people arriving late in the afternoon. Everyone was keen to see Comet McNaught after sunset but being in a valley, the Scout Camp wasn't in an ideal spot with a big mountain blocking the Western horizon. We arranged with one of the local fire fighters for the use of his property - the top of a nearby hill ironically named "Mount Disappointment" which had a better view to the west.

After dinner, we took a short 5-10 minute drive along a dirt road designed for 4WD's (in our "town" cars) to the top of the mountain where we had magnificent views of the surrounding hills while we waited for sunset. As the sky became darker, the comet became easily visible with a bright nucleus and a tail that extended about 10° into the night sky. The view through Al Sheehan's 20x80 tripod-mounted binoculars was spectacular! There were many "oohs" and "aaahs" from the group and many photos were taken to capture the magnificent view on digital media.



A familiar sight each evening, as the comet gave great views whether you used a camera, binoculars, or just your eyes.

As the comet set behind the mountain, everyone drove back to camp thoroughly satisfied and completely excited by what they saw. For those that chose to stay back at camp, upon hearing the stories as they were relayed and seeing the images that were taken, they vowed

not to miss it on Friday night!

I spent the rest of Thursday night imaging with Anthony Wesley and his 33cm planetary monster and Markus Billerwell with his 20cm EQ driven newtonian. I had just recently purchased an EQ6 mount and mounted my 20cm newtonian on top. It was my



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first time setting up an EQ mount, so it was quite a learning experience. We captured Saturn in reasonably good seeing from around 2am and Jupiter just before dawn as the temperature dropped sharply. We went to bed as the Sun crept up over the mountain but I was only able to grab a one hour nap as Markus' destructive snoring rudely woke me up!

Friday was a busy day and I was running on adrenalin all day, thanks to the lack of sleep. The top of the mountain was again well attended by sunset, and Venus shone as a striking beacon in the west and gave us a good indication of the altitude to start looking for the comet in the west southwest. As the sky darkened, the comet's head and tail became easily visible to the naked eye, probably about magnitude -2 at the core. The tail was even more spectacular to-night, stretching up to cover 15° of sky with an arc reaching out to the right. The best views of the tail were seen well after the head of the comet had set and was easily seen still reaching out from the mountain as we drove back to camp.

The highlight of Friday's viewing



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was observing through the 30cm Bi-Newtonian built by Paul Shopis. It was a magnificent piece of work with dual 30cm Mark Suchting F/5 optics. Mark also gave technical input into the design and construction. Everyone who observed through it was speechless and the contrast and sharpness, combined with the 3-dimensional view offered by using both eyes, was absolutely outstanding. For Chris Malikoff, it was such an impressive, majestic and memorable experience he's now already ordered a set of Mark Suchting optics to build his own Bi-Newtonian!

The keynote speaker for IISAC2007 was David Malin, Australia's most recognised scientist-astronomer photographer, who worked at the Anglo-Australian Observatory for over 25 years until 2001. His presentation was titled "Darkroom Magic to Digital Manipulation" and was an intriguing look into his photography work, from Chemistry Labs back in the UK to photographing the universe on the

Left: Anthony Wesley (left) and Mike Sidonio collimate Mike's new 30cm ASA reflector.

Below: Keynote speaker David Malin shared his depth of knowledge of photographic processing techniques.

3.9m Anglo-Australian Telescope.

David's talk was followed by the much-anticipated Lucky Door Prize competition, which saw a mix of adults and kids walk away with prizes. First place was won by young Matthew Burke, who chose the 25cm Dobsonian from MyAstroShop. Matthew was commenting to Gary Kopff before the event how he hoped to win a telescope this year - what a dream come true for a young, budding astronomer! The prizes were generously sponsored by Australian Sky & Telescope, Wildcard Innovations, MyAstroShop, Finger Lakes Instruments, Astronomy Online, Bintel, David Malin Images, SKY:Lab Astronomy Software, Knightware, Astro Optical Supplies, VSO Software, Jump Internet and Gecko Optical Classifieds. My thanks go out to these sponsors who give attendees the chance to win some great gear - and for those that won, made the event even more memorable!

On Saturday night, Venus and the thin crescent Moon made a lovely pair in the west and when joined by the comet just before moonset, the conjunction was complete. The tail of the comet was even more visible this night and stretched further out than any of us had imagined possible. It easily covered 20° of sky in height and about 40° of sky to the north, arching over like a rainbow. Long exposure photos highlighted the striations in the tail that were easily visible with the naked eye.

Earlier in the night, before it got dark, we arranged for a group shot on top of the mountain, with a view to making a composite using the same lens pointing in the same direction, with the second exposure capturing the comet. The resulting image turned out great and was made available printed on a t-shirt for posterity.

The observing field on Saturday night had a celebratory mood and

a lot of us were more inclined to sit around and chat about the weekend's events (especially the comet), than do any serious observing. Rod Berry and I dragged ourselves away from the comfort of the chair, the wine, the chocolate and the savoury snacks, to do some observing. We headed down to the end of the field where the group of large Obsession telescopes were set up. We had some impressive and very deep views of the Orion Nebula, the Tarantula Nebula and other objects through the 46cm and 64cm monsters.

IISAC2007 was a great follow-up to IISAC2006. We had over 170 attendees enjoying the clear, dark skies over the 3 nights and I hope everyone who attended got what they were looking for out of the star party. It was a friendly, relaxed atmosphere, clear and dark skies, chatting and observing with like-minded amateur astronomers, through a wide range of telescopes, both large and small. The event played host to visitors from all over Australia and also a group from Singapore and Malaysia!

My personal highlight was of course the comet; it was the most amazing thing I have ever seen in the night sky - a sight forever etched in my memory and one which will never be forgotten. It was great for me personally to have my family there with me as we sat and observed the comet. I feel very fortunate to have been able to share the amazing experience with them. I imagine it's the same for almost everyone who gathered at the top of Mount Disappointment to view the spectacle. It was certainly no disappointment! It was such a stroke of luck that the timing of the camp coincided with the comet gracing our skies.

Driving home this year was similar to last year - a real relief after such a long build-up and the work in planning, organising and running the event. My mind skipped from memories of the comet, to memories of people I'd met, to thoughts about the huge amount of image processing that was waiting for me, to contemplating

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Top: Paul Shopis' 30cm bino-telescope was quite a sight - and the views were even better.

Below: Obsession telescopes stood out in the large aperture category and left many observers breathless.

what I'd do differently next time. My thanks go out firstly to my wife, Kate, for putting up with and supporting me with my obsession. Thanks also to the IISAC organising committee whose assistance was invaluable and also thanks to the guest speakers - John Bambury, Peter Read, Remus Chua, Ian Maclean, Noel Welstead, Mike Sidonio and David Malin who put up with the heat to give us informative and entertaining

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talks. Finally, special thanks must go to all those people that attended and contributed to a wonderful weekend.

The next IISAC event will be IISAC2008, over 3 nights starting from October 30th next year, to take advantage of better weather patterns (cooler days!) at that time of year. The long wait will be frustrating but it will give me time to organise something special that can somehow be equal to Comet McNaught! I was thinking maybe a supernova. Would anyone miss Eta Carinae if I could arrange for it to explode? *

Mike Salway is the founder and administrator of the *IceInSpace* website (www.iceinspace.com.au)