

IceInSpace AstroCamp 2006

The Australia Day long-weekend saw the launch of the newest star party on the Australian astro calendar – the IceInSpace AstroCamp. The organiser, **Mike Salway**, reports.

THE ONLINE ASTRONOMY FORUM, IceInSpace, held its inaugural AstroCamp over the Australia Day long-weekend in January. The venue was the Lostock Scout Camp, set in the beautiful rolling hills of the Hunter Valley near Dungog and Gresford, about three and a half hours drive north of Sydney. The Scout Camp has two bunkhouses (about 40 beds), hot and cold running water, 240V power, an amenities block with 10 toilets and 10 showers, BBQs and full kitchen facilities.

Nobody really knew how dark it would be, or how the facilities would hold up to a gang of star-hungry amateur astronomers. It had been home in the past to over 500 camping scouts, which gave us confidence ... but as a star party site it was untested.

I arrived at the site on a drizzly Thursday morning to

start setting up and preparing for the first arrivals. The clouds and rain didn't bother me, as I had complete faith in the weatherman's prediction that it would clear up later in the day. The clouds started clearing and the temperature increased, as did the humidity.

Mid-afternoon, the formalities got underway as I gave a welcome speech and invited Lesa Moore to give the first presentation. Lesa is a PhD student at Macquarie University; her talk was on "Low Surface Brightness Galaxies in the Virgo Cluster". It was very interesting to hear and see the type of work that "real" astronomers do – they certainly don't gaze admiringly at the stars through big telescopes, as most of us might believe. Lesa has been awarded observation time on the giant Gemini 8m telescope in Hawaii, which will be a fascinating experience for her I'm sure. We wish her clear and dark skies!

Then it was time for dinner, which was catered for each night by the local Gresford Rural Fire Brigade. They did a fantastic job feeding the masses with BBQed meat, salads and desert. There was plenty to eat and usually seconds for those with more of an appetite. Some of the cooks spent a bit of time after dark wandering the fields chatting and looking through some telescopes. I think they enjoyed being there as much as we enjoyed having them there!

Paul Russell from Queensland got the night underway

with a practical workshop on polar aligning, while Eddie Roca and Warren Norrie gave "sky tours" with their 45cm Dobs. It was a lovely clear night, but it did get a bit dewy once the temperature dropped after 11:00pm. And the sky was dark – it's a lovely dark site nestled in a long valley with minimal sky glow low in the east. Our neighbouring galaxies, the LMC and SMC really stood out, and the Coal Sack near Crux was inky black. As Crux and Centaurus climbed higher in the sky as the early hours of the morning approached, "The Emu" which runs from the Coal Sack to the back of the Scorpion also was very pronounced.

I spent some time with my scope during the night examining galaxies in Fornax and Eridanus, but the highlight of the night was viewing Saturn at 446x through John Bambury's 25cm Dob paired with a 7mm Pentax XW eyepiece and a 2.5x Powermate. The seeing was very steady and during brief moments of exceptional seeing the crisp views of the ringed giant were outstanding.

Big Dobs, No Bull

Friday started where Thursday left off – clear, sunny and hot. Most people tried to keep cool by staying out of the Sun, taking advantage of the provided drinks and ice block tubes and by spending time in the water hole. A creek runs through the property and part of it has been dammed off to provide an ideal swimming spot: safe and fun for kids and adults. The swimming hole was a very popular congregation area during the hot days and some rope swings enhanced the entertainment value as the "blokes" tried to one-up each other, seeing how far they could climb up the rope and swing from the trees!

Mike Boggan and Erik Bruner, who both made the long drive down from Queensland for the event, provided lunch on Friday and Saturday in the form of homemade sausages. The sausages were made on-site, flavoured with varying types of herbs and spices. They were the best sausages I've ever tasted and those who tried them have been spoiled – it won't be possible for us to eat a supermarket sausage again!



Lesa Moore from Macquarie University gave a fascinating talk on low-surface brightness galaxies.



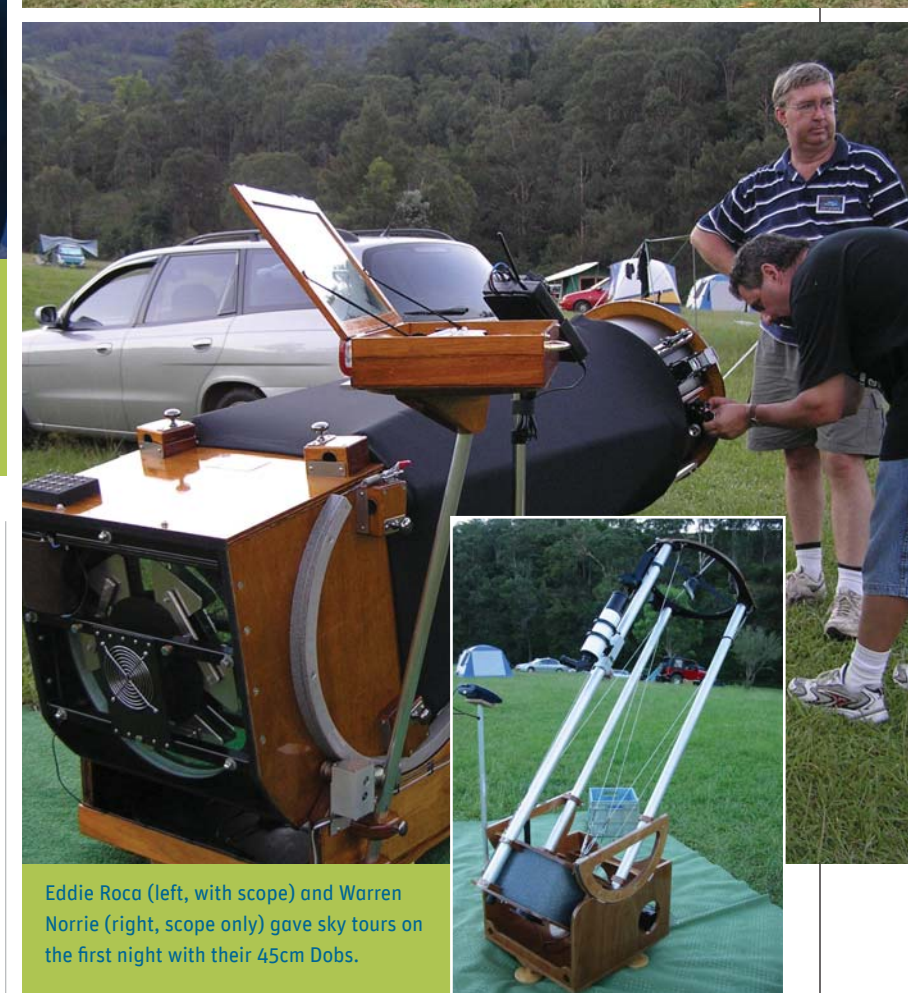
The author and IceInSpace AstroCamp organiser, Mike Salway, pauses before heading back onto the field of astro combat.



The Lostock Scout Camp in New South Wales' Hunter Valley was an ideal location for the AstroCamp.



Almost 100 people attended from all over Australia.



Eddie Roca (left, with scope) and Warren Norrie (right, scope only) gave sky tours on the first night with their 45cm Dobs.



Friday afternoon saw a “DSLR Imaging Workshop”. Scott Alder spoke about setting up and capturing the image, after which he showed us images he’d captured of some incredibly faint planetary nebulae. Scott was followed by Tony Hitchcock, who gave a tutorial on image processing using ImagesPlus. The motto of Tony’s talk was “Don’t clip the histogram!”, and discussions on imaging and processing followed long after the workshop had officially ended. Around this time the bravery award went to Eddie Roca for his efforts in chasing a Murray Grey bull away from his 45cm Dob, and Warren Norrie’s 45cm Dob as well, after it became too inquisitive.

Friday night was clear, and this time another big Dob was on the field. Andrew Murrell turned up with his 50cm Dob (“Hector”), and provided guided Sky Tours, sharing both the views through his scope and his extensive knowledge of the objects being observed. It was reported that Andrew’s

dulcet tones could still be heard well after 2:00am on both nights. The temperature dropped quickly and early, and as things started to get wet at around 10:00pm, those without dew shields or other dew control measures had a tough time keeping dry. I spent my time viewing open and globular clusters around Crux, Carina and Dorado, using a 22mm Panoptic with my 25cm Dob.

Clear and Dark

Saturday morning was refreshingly cloudy, which helped to keep the temperatures down for a little while at least. Michael Chaytor from Bintel set up a stall to sell some gear and there were several informal workshops on collimation and mirror cleaning.

By 11:00am it was clearing again and another hot day was upon us.

Saturday’s official workshop was conducted by Anthony Wesley from Canberra, a fine planetary imager, on the topic of “High-resolution planetary imaging”. Anthony discussed the main limiting factors involved in successful high-resolution planetary imaging and spent considerable time explaining how thermal issues, such as how your mirror not being near ambient temperature affects the quality of your image. This was clearly demonstrated by two Mars AVIs he’d captured — one when the mirror had not reached ambient temperature, and one when it had. The difference was amazing.

Anthony had brought his new rig with him: a 33cm equatorially-mounted Newtonian, with a mirror by Mark Suchting (Deep Sky Optics), monitored by temperature sensors and actively cooled by a home-made refrigeration unit mounted to the mirror cell. The whole scope set-up, including Losmandy G-11 mount, filter wheel and focuser, was remotely controlled on his laptop, using software he’d written. It was a magnificent rig and drew much attention when people saw it for the first time.

On Saturday afternoon, Gary Kopff from Wildcard

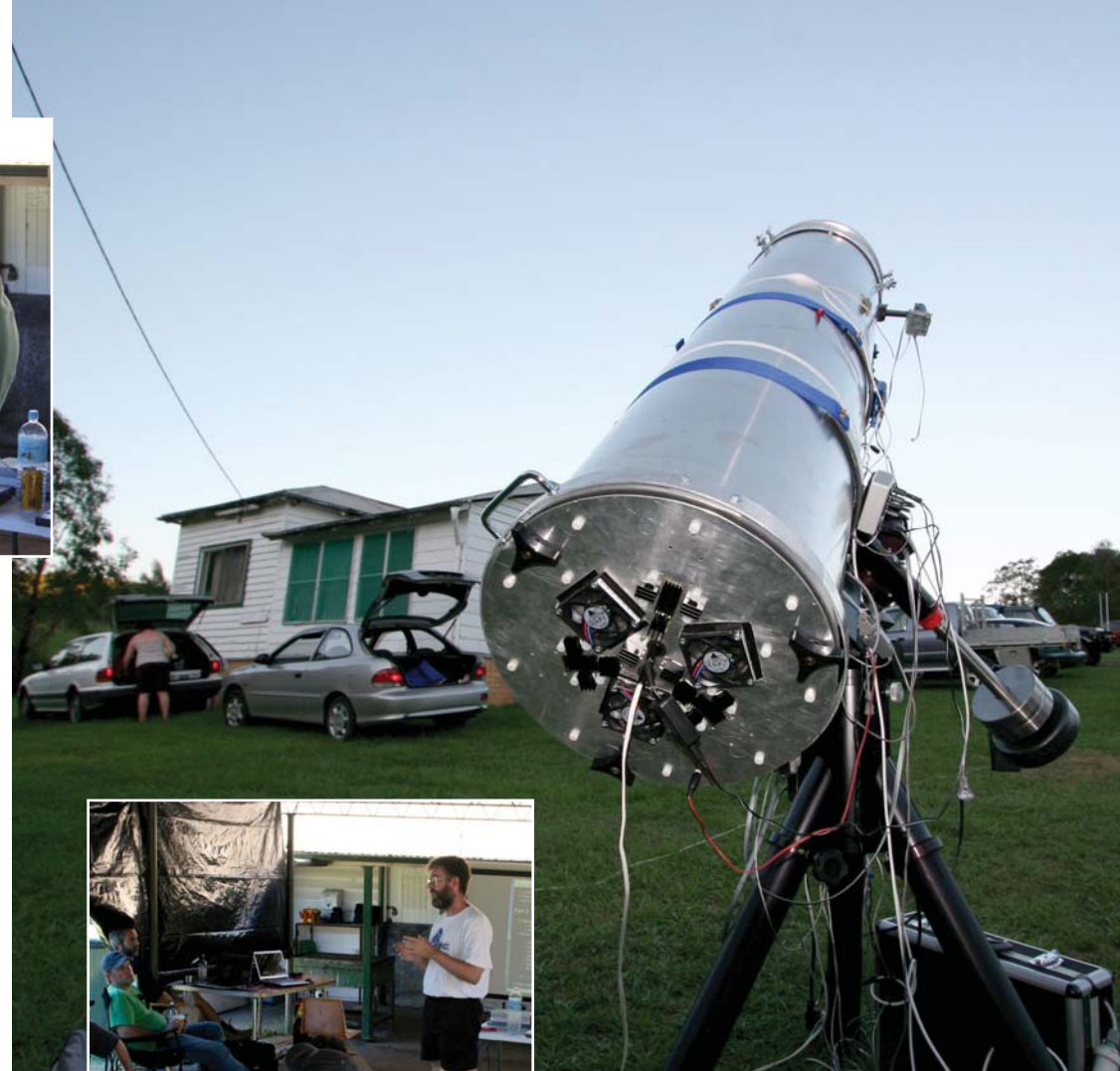


Above: Gary Kopff from Wildcard Innovations showed off the latest version of his company’s Argo Navis computer system. **Right:** Canberra Anthony Wesley hosted a popular workshop on high-resolution planetary imaging. He also brought along his hi-tech 33cm Newtonian (top right), fitted with temperature sensors and a cooling system.

Innovations, creator of the Argo Navis Digital Telescope Computer, gave a very interesting talk about the history, development and features of the device. Gary is an inspirational speaker and the group was thoroughly informed and entertained. He also gave up much of his observing time to help those around the field with their Argo Navises, aiding them in the use of the TPAS feature in the new Argo Navis firmware.

The lucky door prize draw was well attended. Rod Berry’s four-year-old son Noah was drawn out first, and he chose the 12” premium GSO Dob sponsored by Bintel. Andrew Catsaitis walked away with the Argo Navis DTC sponsored by Wildcard Innovations; Elliott Broadhurst took the Orion ED80; Adam Bialek took the 6mm Vixen LV sponsored by MyAstroShop; Aaron Burke won the subscription sponsored by *Australian Sky & Telescope*; Ron Perkins won the Star Atlas:Pro software sponsored by Sky:LAB Astronomy Software; Graeme Auld took the 114mm reflector donated by Ed Roca; and Brittany Broadhurst won the legal advice prize from HBI Lawyers. My thanks to all the sponsors for supplying the prizes.

Saturday night was clear and dark. A light breeze kept the dew away, which was a refreshing change. Ron Knight from Queensland made an unexpected stop in on his way back to the Sunshine Coast from Perth, and chatted and observed with the group. My family came up as well, and one of the highlights for me was just lying on the grass with my six-year-old son, Jacob, staring up at the Milky Way looking for satellites and meteors. The other highlight was spending some time with Hector — the views of the barred spiral NGC 1365 in Fornax, and later NGC 5128 in Centaurus, were nothing short of spectacular.



This was the first major event I had ever organised, and I was really pleased with how it turned out. We had

almost 100 attendees over the three days and were really lucky to have three beautiful clear nights. It was such a friendly atmosphere and it was great to see that people felt so comfortable to be able to simply walk up to someone and start chatting. It also was great to put faces to the online names I’d gotten to know through the IceInSpace forums. Many new friendships were made, and the kids got on really well and had a great time entertaining each other, playing and swimming in the water hole.

My thanks to all the volunteers who helped me organise and run the event, especially David Hough whose assistance was invaluable. Thanks also to Alan Meehan for the great t-shirts and to the guest speakers who educated and entertained us with their expert knowledge in their fields. Finally, special thanks must go to all those people that attended and contributed to a wonderful weekend.

There will be two IceInSpace AstroCamps in 2007 — the first will be held January 18-21, followed by another one over October 11-17, 2007, to take advantage of better weather at that time of year. Keep an eye on the IceInSpace website (www.iceinspace.com.au) for more details. *

Mike Salway works in IT and is the creator and main moderator of the IceInSpace website, www.iceinspace.com.au



Top: Scott Alder (left) and Tony Hitchcock gave expert advice on digital astro imaging at a workshop on the Friday afternoon. **Centre:** Who invited him? **Below:** Andrew Murrell (right) turned up with his gargantuan 50cm Dobsonian, called “Hector”, and gave his famous sky tours to all comers.