

Astronomy Delight!

by Ed and Susan Forrest

Amateur Astronomy Astronomy Clubs, Computerized Telescopes, And The Internet!

During the past few months I have written in this column about how to get started in the hobby of amateur astronomy. Although my articles were mostly geared towards seniors and those who are nearing retirement, the advice and recommendations I provided apply to almost anyone who has an interest in exploring the final frontier in this fascinating lifelong hobby. The most important recommendations, I offered such as “get outside and look”, “purchase simple beginner books and a planetsphere” and “consider acquiring good binoculars rather than an expensive telescope” when first starting out were in my opinion the most important recommendations to a beginner. Now, as I promised I will explain why I held off recommending (as many other amateur astronomers do also) that those first starting out join the local astronomy clubs, purchase any one of the multitude of popular computerized telescopes, or begin to browse the internet. Let’s start by talking about purchasing that first telescope.

As for a beginner purchasing a “super-duper-finds everything in the universe-aligns itself-has a 40,000 object data base-shows you Pluto-and guaranteed to come with star maps, astronomical software and the like...” type computerized telescope, forget it. Unless as you know GMT, what 03:25 HRs means, can find Pollux, know about the NGC catalog, your latitude, or the difference between apparent and actual field of view and Cassegrains, Maks, Refractors, Reflectors, arc seconds and other “neat stuff” the telescope manufacturers ASSUME you know, you are wasting your money. In fact, the vast majority of people that I have met over the years who purchased such sophisticated instruments when first starting out in astronomy no longer use their telescopes, or for that matter even pursued an interest in amateur astronomy. The reason being that the telescopes were too confusing to use and people had

no idea what they were observing! Both the learning curve pertaining to the operation of a high-tech telescope and the observation of either unknown or dim astronomical objects can be overwhelming to the uninitiated. My advice when purchasing that first telescope, buy a basic no frills, 6 inch Dobsonian reflector. This is a simple, easily transportable, rugged, “point and shoot” telescope that will allow anybody to easily learn how to operate a telescope and its accessories while observing literally thousands and thousands of objects in the heavens. They cost less than about \$250 and can be ordered online from Orion Telescopes, Celestron, Meade, and many other manufacturers who advertise in the astronomy magazines that I recommended last month such as Astronomy and Sky and Telescope. Another word of advice while considering the purchase of that first telescope...don’t buy a telescope in a department store! Buy from a store that deals exclusively with astronomy related products.

As for running out and joining a club once that astronomy bug has bitten you, my recommendation is to wait until you have read some, looked at the night sky a few times, and have acquired a basic understanding of the science of astronomy. Most amateur astronomers who belong to established clubs love to share their knowledge with others. However, from my experience few have the patience to listen to those new folks who arrive with stories of UFO abductions, Roswell, or want to know what that bright light in the sky was that they saw outside their window was when they were a child. Even worse, few amateur astronomers at star parties in local communities can tolerate those who arrive with bright flashlights, loud radios, or children who love to run in the dark around expensive beloved equipment! The majority of amateur astronomers of all ages are smart, VERY smart people, who for the most part are self educated in the science of astronomy and never attended an astronomy course, received a degree, or taught at a university. They value interacting with people young and old who can appreciate how the beauty and mystery of the universe can

inspire people to want to learn about nature and the cosmos. A beginner can receive a wealth of knowledge and advice from most club members, if they appreciate that the hobby of amateur astronomy is unique in that those who embrace it (like those throughout human history) are on a lifelong quest to learn more and more about the infinite realms of the universe. Arrive prepared with a basic knowledge of astronomy and you will be welcomed wholeheartedly! Show up asking what the bright orb in the daylight is, or the bright orb in the night sky that changes shape during the month is and you might be asked to leave (unless you teach in some of the public schools that I know of, in which case someone may take pity on you and let you hang around).

Lastly, why do I always recommend that beginning amateur astronomers stay away from the internet and stick with books and magazines? Simple...Google "astronomy" and you will receive millions and millions of hits! Everything from the basics to the super advanced only Einstein could understand, can easily intimidate, and overwhelm a beginning astronomy enthusiast who may believe you have to be a genius to participate in this hobby. There is far too much information, and although a lot of it is highly informative, much is contradictory, confusing, out of date, and down right false. A perfect example is the famous internet "Mars Hoax" that I have written about in the past whereby the planet Mars becomes the size of a basketball in the sky every summer. Of course websites such as NASA or Hubble are great and contain a wealth of knowledge for a beginner,

but in my opinion the more simple sites such as those maintained by Astronomy or Sky and Telescope magazine are better suited for all levels of beginners in the hobby. Gain some basic knowledge then surf the net to your hearts content!

So get started on your own personal journey of inspiration and knowledge by taking up the hobby of amateur astronomy! Join with millions of people of all ages and walks of life worldwide who gather nightly under the sky to gaze upward and wonder at the final frontier. You will never regret the experience of observing the universe. Nobody throughout history ever has.

Astronomy Delight! Headquartered in Hyde Park, N.Y. welcomes your questions and comments regarding this column and offers day and night after-school enrichment programs, classroom events, scouts, camps, group lectures, individual astronomy programs, and observation courses for families, parents, and children of all ages throughout the country and Tri-state NY area. **FRANCHISE INQUIRYS ARE WELCOME**
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