

# Skywatchers

Newsletter of the China Lake Astronomical Society

Volume 43 No. 09

September 1, 2006

**NEXT MEETING 7:30 p.m., Monday, September 11, 2006**

Maturango Museum, 100 East Las Flores Avenue, Ridgecrest

## **PROGRAM FOR THE SEPTEMBER 11 MEETING – SPITZER SPACE TELESCOPE**

Our President, Earl Wilson, has arranged for Tim Thompson to visit us and describe the Spitzer Space Telescope to us. This telescope is one of a family of four NASA space telescopes, each operating in a different wavelength range. The Hubble Space Telescope has become very well known for its contributions to astronomy, in the visible range. Its lesser-known cousin, the Spitzer Space Telescope, does its imagery in the infrared. The Hubble telescope is in a relatively low Earth orbit, while the Spitzer has left the bounds of Earth, and is in a solar orbit, trailing the Earth in our journey around the Sun.

Tim has a BS and MS in Physics from California State University at Los Angeles, and has worked at JPL since 1981. He currently works in the Center for Long Wavelength Astrophysics, working on analysis of images and data from the Spitzer Space Telescope. He has also worked on planetary radio astronomy, SETI, and infrared remote sensing of the Earth. He is President Emeritus of the Los Angeles Astronomical Society. Also, he has 23 years of experience on the Board of Directors of the Mt. Wilson Observatory Association. He was our docent guide on the CLAS field trip to Mt. Wilson.

## **DATES TO KEEP IN MIND**

**Monday, September 11, 2006: Regular CLAS Meeting at the Maturango Museum, 7:30 p.m.**

Wednesday, September 20, 2006: Deadline for next Skywatchers Newsletter

Friday, September 22, 2006: Public Star Party. See below.

Monday, October 2, 2006: Regular CLAS Meeting at the Maturango Museum in Ridgecrest, 7:30 p.m.

*Star Parties will resume in March 2007*

## **STAR PARTY SCHEDULE FOR THE 2006 SEASON:**

Star Parties will be held on the dates listed below. Star Parties are an activity where members and guests join together to share views of the skies. If you have a telescope, bring it. If not, come and look through someone else's. Star parties are held at a site in the open desert south of Ridgecrest. To reach the star party site from Ridgecrest, go south on China Lake Boulevard 6.5 miles from its intersection with Ridgecrest Boulevard. Continue straight across Highway 395 and you will be on Brown Road (Old Highway 395). Follow Brown Road as it curves to the right and goes west. After 2.3 miles there will be a 30-inch orange cone on the left. Turn left and follow the dirt road marked by 12-inch cones. The CLAS Star party is 0.5 miles along this road. Watch for signs and cones, which will be put out about a half hour before viewing starts. Call Carroll Evans 760-375-5681, or Bruce Churchill 760-375-7247, for more information.

**Friday, September 22: Signs out at 7:30 p.m., Star viewing 7:30 p.m.**

Friday, October 20: Signs out at 7:00 p.m., Star viewing at 7:30 p.m.

Friday, November 17: Signs out at 6:00 p.m., Star viewing at 6:30 p.m.

### **THE SKY IN SEPTEMBER (Roger Brower)**

1. Venus is still in the morning sky but will slowly sink into the morning twilight as the month goes on. Look for it low in the east-southeast before dawn.
2. Saturn, also in the morning sky, is heading the opposite direction and is rising earlier as the month goes on. Look for them in the east-southeast before dawn.
3. Jupiter is in the evening sky. Look for it in the southwestern sky after dusk.
4. Mercury and Mars are both too close to the sun to be easily visible this month.
5. If you are fortunate enough to be in the south Atlantic on September 22, you will be treated to an annular eclipse of the sun.

### **PUBLIC STAR PARTIES AT THE MATURANGO MUSEUM, 2006 SEASON**

The China Lake Astronomical Society has hosted public viewing at the Museum's Observatory on the following Thursday evenings: June 22, June 29, July 20, July 27, August 17, and August 24. The dome was open, of course, and CLAS members brought extra telescopes to set up in the vicinity.

We have extended our scheduled programs into September, on the 21st and 28<sup>th</sup>. So please bring a telescope or two for these added dates. Call Carroll Evans for details.

You might like to know how we did so far this season. For the first star party, we had several telescopes, and exactly one guest. For the second one, a week later, we had four times as many people. We attribute this low participation to the massive crack that things fall into once in a while, thus the lack of newspaper coverage. For the third scheduled Star Party, the newspaper coverage was not much, if any. However, the sky was fully covered, so we cancelled. For the fourth we got excellent write-ups in both local papers, and we had about 40 guests. The next two had 30 guests at each presentation.

### **CLAS SKYWATCHERS ARCHIVES (Carroll Evans)**

Ever since the dawn of the Internet (1997 in Ridgecrest) CLAS member John Bush has archived the electronic version of this newsletter. I thank him for his faithful efforts for all these years. It has become necessary for him to relinquish this task, and his archives have been transferred to my own personal web space. For the moment his exact web page is now available at <http://www.ridgenet.net/~clevans/clas/> I will continue the archive, and make minor updates to the page. The update has not yet been accomplished.

### **THE FOLLOWING RECEIVED VIA THE INTERNET ( I am sure that you all heard of the I.A.U.'s action in revising the status of the object formerly known as the Planet Pluto)**

Subject: Demotion to dwarf planet status.

Dear Pluto:

Whew. This is a tough one. First, I just want you to know that we all feel terrible about this. I think I speak for us all -- Mars, Venus, the whole gang -- when I say you've been like a sun to us. Seriously.

Look, I can't say this is fair. It isn't. Downsizing is just a fact of life these days. It's universal. One minute you're on the "Children's Guide to the Solar System," and the next you're a black hole. Who knows how they make these calls at headquarters?

I do have to say, in all honesty, that there were some problems. A lot of it was just image stuff. We've talked about this before. Like, what makes Mercury so hot anyhow? It is hard to fight perceptions like that.

And, to be brutally honest, you probably could have done a better job with your presentation. There were times when you were seen as distant, aloof, even cold. Nobody saw you much. We ran in the same circles for years and years, but I don't think anybody really got to know you. It wasn't just your "eccentric orbit," you know. There were plenty of whispers that you were "way out there," or "too spacey."

As for the jokes, well, I don't think there was much you could do about that. "Hey look, isn't that Pluto? Out by Uranus?" How many times did we hear that one? No matter how many times we explained that Neptune is the planet next to you, it didn't matter. Sophomoric humor is a force that transcends astrophysics.

At the end of the day, I think we all realize that what it really comes down to is Earth. (I know, who made them the center of the universe?) Earth, with its big, gassy atmosphere and all those peeping pointy-headed scientists with their telescopes.

They act like they created planets. Hello? Big Bang? Ten billion years ago? Frankly, I don't get it. First they name us, then they take it away. For seventy-some years you were a planet. Now you're a "dwarf planet." What's next, changing your name to "Dopey"?

But there was a time, eh, when you were a star. Back in the 1930s, you were mysterious and theoretical. Astronomers on Earth stayed up nights thinking about you. They'd hang around the observatory, just hoping to catch a glimpse of you on a night when you were out with Neptune.

Remember the excitement when they finally saw you? There was all the talk about what your name should be. The New York Times got involved, suggesting Minerva, which sounds like a name for a new kitchen range. And then, an 11-year-old girl from England, Venetia Phair, suggested Pluto, and it stuck. (Personally, I'd say if anyone needed a new name it was Venetia Phair, but that's probably just solar snark.)

And all right, as it turned out, Pluto was probably not the most awe-inspiring choice. Jupiter gets to be the giant of the skies, and you turn out to be Mickey Mouse's dog. A bad break, no doubt about it.

Still, there was a window of opportunity there, a chance to make a name for yourself. And I'll be honest, you didn't do much to help matters. It seemed you were never available for photographs. And you projected a chilly, frigid atmosphere. It wasn't inviting, frankly.

The more they got to know you, the more there were doubts. They said you lacked "gravitas." The whisper campaign began. You were smaller than seven moons in the solar system, even -- and this was a killer -- Earth's moon.

I don't have to tell you how it all unraveled from there. There was sniping about your "oblong orbit." (Hey, we all accept the orbit we're given. It's a universal law.) A low point had to be when that big ball of ice, UB313, was put up for planethood in 2003. Hey, it's a solar system, not a Little League team. Not everybody gets to play, OK?

Yanking your planet status is a blow, no doubt about it. More than anything, I suppose, it is embarrassing. But you'll get over it. The sun will come up again in another 162 hours, just like always.

The good news is, you still have a chance to shine. Earth scientists say they are going ahead with the \$700 million New Horizons spacecraft flyby. It is expected to pass you on July 14, 2015.

We're all pulling for you when that happens. We know that when they see you up close and in person they will understand that you are not some dwarf, or a "minor planet," but a key part of the solar system. We'd just say that you should always remember who you are and what we think of you.

You rock.

*C.W. Nevius' column appears regularly in The Chronicle. His blog, [cwnevius.blog](http://cwnevius.blog), and podcast, "News Wrap," can be found on SFGate.com. E-mail him at [cwnevius@sfchronicle.com](mailto:cwnevius@sfchronicle.com)*

## MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Basic CLAS dues are \$20.00 per year, which includes the *Skywatchers Newsletter*. As a benefit of membership you may also receive *Astronomy Magazine* and/or *Sky and Telescope Magazine*. The fee schedule is as follows:

Basic membership	\$20.00 per year
Membership with Astronomy magazine	\$51.00 per year
Membership with Sky and Telescope magazine	\$53.00 per year
Membership with both S & T and Astronomy	\$84.00 per year

Send your check to: Roger Brower, Treasurer, China Lake Astronomical Society, P.O. Box 1783, Ridgecrest, CA 93556.

PRESIDENT – Earl Wilson – 760-876-5455 (email [zearl.email@gmail.com](mailto:zearl.email@gmail.com))  
VICE-PRESIDENT – Bruce Churchill - 760-375-7247 (email [bchurchill@atsecure.net](mailto:bchurchill@atsecure.net))  
SECRETARY – Ted Hodgkinson - 661- 824-2738 (email [longeyes@antelecom.net](mailto:longeyes@antelecom.net))  
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NEWSLETTER EDITOR – Carroll Evans Jr. - 760-375-5681 (email [clevans@ridgenet.net](mailto:clevans@ridgenet.net))

**WESTERN AMATEUR ASTRONOMERS WEB SITE** <http://www.waa.av.org/>

Meetings of the China Lake Astronomical Society are held at the **Maturango Museum** at 7:30 p.m. on the first Monday evening of each month, except when the first Monday is a holiday, which is the case in September.

**SKYWATCHERS, Newsletter of the**

**CHINA LAKE ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY  
POST OFFICE BOX 1783  
RIDGECREST, CA 93556-1783**

**FIRST CLASS**

**NEXT MEETING: 7:30 p.m., MONDAY SEPTEMBER 11, 2006: “Spitzer Space Telescope”  
AT THE MATURANGO MUSEUM, 100 EAST LAS FLORES AVE.  
CLAS WEB PAGE <http://www1.iwvisp.com/brower/clas.html>  
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