

## CN Visits: The Third Annual Great Lakes Star Gaze



By [Tom Trusock](#) - 9/30/05 to 10/2/05

*H*ow many times do you have to do something before you can call it a tradition?

This is certainly one event I'd be in favor of defining as such - good friends, good skies, and great equipment scattered everywhere you look. Yep, all in all, this added up to be another fantastic Great Lakes Star Gaze.

For the past few years, the Sunset Astronomical Society has put on the Michigan statewide Star Party – the Great Lakes Star Gaze. Located outside of Gladwin Michigan, at the River Valley RV park, the site boasts mag 6.5 to 7 skies, great facilities (including a modern campground complete with hot showers), and a large observing field that is completely isolated from the campground. There are darker sites in Michigan, but in years of looking the SAS (and myself) haven't seen one that's more astronomer friendly – at least for a good sized group.



M33 – Jeff Thrush / WO FLT 110 and Paramount

After the demise of SMURFs a few years back (for those who simply think a SMURF is a small blue elf-like creature think again), the GLSG has rapidly developed into Michigan's premiere stargazing event and as such has grown rapidly – more rapidly than anyone really expected. The first get together was a mere four years ago when a dozen or so folks from the Michigan Astronomy Group decided to

gather. The SAS saw a vacuum and organized the first official GLSG the following year.

Attendance this year (2005) boasted probable attendance of around 225 like minded astro-geeks for this late season star party.

While there had initially been some worry about the size of the field (last year's 140 or so generally swamped it) the owners of River Valley and the members of the SAS took a number of steps to give us more real and effective space. They increased the size of the observing field and then structured the available space. The result? More people than ever, but absolutely none of those pesky – “I can't slew my 20" dob without knocking over five 4" refractor” complaints.

My sainted wife and I, along with our two girls (Sam @ 10 months and AJ @ 4 years), arrived around 3 pm Friday afternoon to find the observing field already populated with a hundred plus astronomers anticipating the weekend. After setting up the camper, I abandoned the wife and family to go register. Immediately I ran into fellow Cloudy Nights guru John Crilly who had made the trip from Ohio. Boy, was I glad to see John. Not only is he a good friend, he's also our resident mount expert, and I had an LX75 I wanted him to take a look at.



**Registration at the GLSG – Photo Credit Bill Albe**

After making our way through the registration line (which included a chance to buy raffle tickets for a Denkmeier binoviewer system specially engraved for the GLSG, and an 8" EQ Newt donated by Antlers Optics, SAS and DBA) we headed down the field looking for a place to set up. We decided on a spot slightly off the center of the field - all the while gawking at the people, scopes and tents already on the field. Don Wheelers place in particular was well planned. Don had managed to set a couple of tents up in such a way as to provide a “front lawn” for observing. Don's one of the most prolific scope

traders I know, and his area was easily identifiable. When it comes to star parties, Don knows what's what – that's for sure. Anyway, John and I spread out a bit to hold a spot for fellow CN mod Gary Gibbs 20" Obsession – err – umm – check that, I mean for Gary **and** his 20" Obsession. John produced the RCX he had on loan from Astronomics and his 20" Teeter dob. I, on the other hand, took a total of five refractors and four mounts (largely because I was scheduled to give an equipment talk the following day). Of the scopes I took that weekend, the FLT and the Tak saw the most use. As an aside, everybody who saw the FLT expressed interest (it's a gorgeous scope), and Saturday night I "loaned" it to a couple of good buddies of mine – Jeff Thrush and Clay Kessler - to image with. Sitting on Jeff's Paramount the WO made for a very impressive combination. In any case, with John and Gary, then our club 25 - Dobzillia - about 10 feet away, followed by the Warren club's big dob, and a few more big dobs scattered nearby, I slowly got the feeling I was refractor-man in dobland. Fortunately my buddy Ed T showed up with his FS128 and together we established an apo outpost on this end of the field.



Center Field – Photo Credit Bill Albe

Spreading my four mounts, table and chairs over a disproportionate amount of area (and ignoring the looks I was getting from other amateurs), I headed back down to the camper to discover my wife and kids wondering about dinner. Basically, where was I and when were we going to eat! We debated about going to the Munch-Mobile (which provided sustenance all weekend long for those campers who had neglected to bring food – amazing what astronomers will forget, eh?) but in the end we decided to do the sandwich thing back at the trailer. I missed getting a walking taco this year, and still regret it.

At 7pm, the event “officially” kicked off with a talk by Rick Krejci who gave a very nice slide show entitled - “Astrophotography on a Budget”. I’d like to note that Rick is an accomplished astro photographer who recently moved from the cloudy skies of Arizona to the clear blue dome of Michigan. And while yours truly is by no stretch any form of night sky photographer, I still found it an interesting, made more so by the samples of Rick’s imagery.



**Jim Ehlers and his 6” f12 AP**

Afterwards, the four year old and I made our way up the hill to let some photons penetrate our retinas.

And what an array of telescopes to choose from! You could take your pick, from PJ’s refractors to Gary’s dob to Don’s retinue (he’s completely impartial, loving both reflector and refractor equally – my kinda guy), the

only dilemma was in which scope to choose. There was some interesting equipment, that’s for certain. Some standout’s for me were Jim’s 6” f12 AP Super Planetary, his friend’s folded f15 refractor, Gibb’s 20” dob, Ed’s FS128, and although I can’t have claimed to look through it, Jeff’s Paramount. In years past, I’ve dutifully listed the largest telescopes on the field, and described the views through them. This year, that is an impossibility. I will say there were a plethora of big dobs there with at least one monster 25”, and possibly a couple larger. I’d have needed a week to look through them all. As it was, I didn’t even get to spend time with all my friends. There was just too much to do and to see.

After Gary treated my daughter to some views through his 20 inch, she



**Warren Astronomical Society – Club Dob**

drifted off in a chair, basically indicating that she was a tad bit tired. Incidentally, I discovered this weekend that a 4 year olds gentle foot swinging is “just” strong enough to knock a power cable out of a battery pack. Additionally, I found that if left to itself, Meades Autostar likes to pick alignment stars no one’s ever heard of. I mean seriously, Meade – Rasalhague? Before I get a dozen e-mails asking how I could fail to know that Rasalhague is Alpha Ophiuchi, let me say I do indeed know that now, and in my defense, none of the dozen or so astronomers surrounding me on the field had any clue at the time either – one of them being an Astronomy Professor for a local college! But that’s another story.

Anyway – back to the sleepy daughter. As it was fully dark now, returning to the camper meant rappelling down the massive slope known by its deceptively gentle name - “The Hill”.

For those of you who haven’t been there and seen it with your own eyes, “The Hill” is a serious beast deserving respect and the occasional small sacrifice. My club’s default observing site is River Valley so I tend to spend 4-6 nights a year on the field, and frankly I think “The Hill” gets higher every time I go. During the day, you can drive up, but after 10pm, the drive is roped off and you need to use the foot trail on “The Hill”. Going down isn’t so bad, you just need to watch for the bodies of those who had heart attacks on their way up. The only real problem is that if you leave your car at the top, you’ll need to climb “The Hill” at some point – well either that, or buy a new car. We made it down. Many minutes later, I made it back up.

Michigan is notorious for its weather – if you don’t like it just wait five minutes – the saying goes. Well, we were blessed with two excellent astronomical nights. A front had gone through mid-Michigan just a day or two before, and Friday night graced us with very transparent skies



**B33 and Environs – Tony Licata**

that made for some excellent deep sky viewing – no matter the size of the telescope. Somewhat surprisingly – it is a small telescope after all - the 110mm WO FLT gave me one of the best views of M33 I’ve ever had. Several spiral arms (along with other detail)

were easily visible in a field that gracefully framed the galaxy. I'll leave you to imagine what it looked like in a 20". You'll have to. Words fail me.

Seeing, as happens so often in this area of the country, varied inversely with transparency, and thus we had a wonderful deep sky night, but sadly, one that turned out quite poorly for the planets. Our hopes were pinned on the next night.



**WO FLT 110 on a Paramount – A dream imaging setup**

Either this night or the next, (they tend to blend into each other when you get as little sleep as I did) I wandered a bit and took a gander through some of the other scopes on the field – spending a disproportionate amount of time through the smaller telescopes – 4” and 5” apos. PJ’s Showa was in attendance, and put on a most impressive performance, as did Jason’s 4” Vixen fluorite. Don’s 5” borg was also remarkable – although not so much for what was there, but what wasn’t there. The Borg wasn’t quite as well corrected as some of the other telescopes on the field, but it made up for it in its sheer lack of size and weight. Ed’s FS128 on his Tak mount was, in a word, intimidating. It delivered beautiful views. Both my observing partners for the weekend packed it in early, John retiring to his newly purchased tent, and Gary retreating to

the back of his truck. Both were asleep sometime around midnight.

About 2am, I decided to call it. If you have kids, you’ll understand. There’s no such thing as sleeping in. They were going to be up at 7:30am no matter when I went to bed, and momma and I along with them.

So, in the wee hours (when the party was really just starting), I found myself stumbling down “The Hill” to the campground. Tonight the beast was evidently sated as it made no move to kill or maim me. Tomorrow we’d see about the next round.



**The Amish were up earlier than most**

As I descended to the bottom, I was rewarded with a glimpse of Orion rising over the small lake on the River Valley property – truly a beautiful sight. I couldn't help but wonder – One fantastic night, but would we get another?

Back at the trailer by 2:15, I lay awake in the dark thinking and finally fell asleep sometime after 3. My 10 month old daughter did her bit during the night to ensure that momma and I didn't get too much sleep, and we were treated to a wake up call at 6:30am sharp by the four year old. Through judicious use of threats and deception, we manage to eek out another hour or so from our young trailer goddess, and eventually struggled out of bed to greet the morn.



**Riders Hobby Shop and The Much-Mobile in the background**

It was time to climb “The Hill” and reclaim my truck. I needed to purchase gas, and was hoping to spend a little time visiting telescopes – err – make that my friends. Making ready, I swore to myself I'd maintain a steady pace, roped myself to the guy lines and was only

mildly out of breath by the time I reached

the top. I must have been climbing a bit slow, as it seemed I was repeatedly passed by small children racing each other to the top. In fact, now that I think about it, I think I was passed by the same small child several times. In any rate, I (and my heart) made it up. Most amateurs were still asleep or had wandered off in small herds to graze. The Munch Mobile puts on a very respectable eat for a minimum of dollars, and the McDonalds in Gladwin (about 15 miles away) is also a viable alternative. By the time I'd driven into Gladwin to fill up the truck, it was 11am, and time for the swap and shop.

We were lucky to have several vendors there this year. In terms of size, I'd have to say that Riders was the largest. John brought a Class A motorhome loaded down with nice toys – all for sale – assuming you had the money. Dale from DBA and Scott from Anttlers optics also brought a lot of stock. Walt (Walt's Observing Chairs) was there, as was a gentleman from Meridian Telescopes. Rounding out the swap meet was a nice supply of used equipment from various individuals. As was my wont, I proved unable to escape without at least one purchase. Fortunately it was minor – an Orion eyepiece belt case.

It's amazing how fast time flies. Looking at my watch, I saw that I just had time to grab some lunch and then take AJ (the four year old) down to the children's events at 1pm.



**Pin-the-tail-on-the-comet**

Kudo's to the SAS. They had a raft of entertainment and prizes for the kids. Scavenger hunts (even if no one could find the very last object), Pin the tail on the Comet and arts and crafts like creating your own Mars globe were all big hits – as was the bag of candy and prizes they came home with.

At 2pm, I headed down to the pavilion to listen to Joe Bruessow give a talk on observing mars and to set up the plethora of equipment for my own talk (What's new in Astro Equipment) – coming up next. I was followed by Norbert Vance's

excellent lecture on “model” rocketry – I use the word model lightly here. The beasts he showed bore as much resemblance to the traditional Estes model rocket as a short tube 80 bears to an 18” Obsession. Unfortunately he couldn't launch what he wanted to – he was afraid of killing a cow on the way back down. (Seriously.)

Then it was off to start the grill – brats and dogs were on my menu for the evening, and the wife and I were joined by John and Gary. Unfortunately, I didn't have a chance to get down to Clay and Jeff's place for the chili they were dishing out, but the brats made for a filling meal all the same.

At 7pm, the door prize raffles started. Kids first, and to my amazement, AJ won a telescope! A bright red 60mm refractor with a generous supply of eyepieces - this should keep her busy for a long time. When it came time for the adult prizes, it was obvious the vendors didn't skimp. We had 78 door prizes, and around 150-200 people there that

evening. Gary won a CN t-shirt and John a Telrad. Evidently my daughter had used up all my luck, as I came away prize less. But that's ok, the look on her face was enough for me. Incidentally, I'd like to extend a big thank you to all who donated prizes for this event – you made a lot of amateur astronomers very happy.



**Another recruit for the APO outpost...**

Peeking up, amazingly, the night looked to be clear although a bit hazy. Driving the truck back to the top of the hill I found fellow amateurs gearing up for Mars. While the seeing the night before had been lacking, tonight – it was superb. On DSO's transparency suffered a bit, but the views through larger telescopes were still amazing.



**The lure of astro-toys is strong in this group...**

It's probably safe to say that there was one object whose photons made their way into everyone's eyes over the course of the evening - Mars. And some spectacular photons they were. While nothing really equaled the big dobs on the Red Planet (sorry refractor owners, but it's tough to argue with quality aperture), I

have to say the most amazing viewing experience of the weekend for me came when Jason dragged me down to Jim's 6" F12 Super Planetary Astro-Physics refractor. Mark had loaned Jim a set of Denkmeiers, and the target was of course, the Red Planet. Jim's setup was like stepping back in time. A huge refractor set atop a massive (and very well manufactured) mount. The largest setting circles I've ever seen were dimly illuminated with red led's and the entire setup had a 40's and 50's period look to it. To further

enhance the mood Jim was playing 40's music in the background. Once you sat in the chair, you were swept away by the experience of viewing Mars with both eyes, and I had the distinct sense of being transported back in time.

Afterwards I rappelled back down "The Hill", stumbled into a warm bed and tried to get a few



**It's Over – a pair of satisfied but weary astronomers greet the morning...**

hours of sleep.

Morning brought that sense of loss that any ending brings, and for the last time this year, I staggered up “The Hill”. I’d imagined I’d find a combination of sleeping and packing astronomers, I didn’t imagine I’d find one still observing.

No, it wasn’t Sol.

Hours after daylight, Gibbs still had Mars in his 20” Obsession. Having slept most of the previous night, he made up for it with a vengeance on Saturday – not sleeping at all. I’ll award Gary the “Die Hard” observer trophy for that performance. He’s a more tired man than I.

Then it was a final pack up and a short drive down to the campground. We said goodbye to our playmates and started the 3 hour drive home.

Thus endth another chapter of the Great Lakes Star Gaze.



As the saying goes, a great time was had by all, and I wished you could have been there.

There’s really only one last thing that remains to be said: from the porta potties on the field, to the excellent presentations, from the kid’s games and activities, to the coffee, hot chocolate and snacks in the visitors tent one could tell that a LOT of planning went into this years event.. To all the unsung heroes of the SAS – thank you again, for those evenings whose memory will help sustain us through the coming months. What a way to close out the season.

**We can go again next year, right?**