

# THE Prairie Astronomer



## A Ghostly Experience by Rick Johnson

As many of you know, I spend my summers on Big Mantrap Lake in northern Minnesota. It's about 15 miles southeast of Lake Itaska (where the Mississippi River starts). Everyone likes to kid me about my experiences with wildlife up there. While observing at night I have stepped on a skunk, had the air knocked out of me by a deer and nearly been hit by a tree felled by a beaver. This year I had a run in with a ghost and I don't mean the kind you see in your eyepiece. I am talking about the National Inquirer type of ghost. And in broad daylight no less.

In the fall my only neighbor is Charlie Gabbert who lives there year around. This fall he and his wife left for a family reunion in Phoenix a couple days before the ghost made its appearance. Charlie heats with wood during the winter and had all but one pile already cut and split before he left. The unsplit pile was about 6 feet high and covered with a plastic tarp. After several cloudy days the weather finally cleared and I was all set to take a look at the sun. I grabbed the T-Scanner and started down to the beach to get out the 'scope. No sooner than I had left the house than I heard Charlie chopping wood. He is very good with a splitting maul and usually only needs one chop. This time I distinctly heard the chop but not the sound of the falling split wood. So it was time to get in a dig about his ability with the maul. I headed up to the heap to let him have it. Half way there it hit, me he was on the road to Phoenix! Who the heck was chopping wood and why only one chop? As I walked, CHOP! And again no wood fell. Now I was really puzzled. I walked around the wood pile fully expecting to see someone, maybe his son had driven up from the Twin Cities when I wasn't looking. But no one was there. The tarp was still in place with nothing disturbed. No one within a quarter mile yet someone was doing a rather poor but loud job of chopping wood!

Maybe Arnie down on the point had got someone to chop up some of his dead trees. I started the quarter mile walk to Arnie's when suddenly from behind me at Charlie's woodpile CHOP! It was out of sight but the chop had come from the woodpile there was no doubt. I ran back up the hill but again nothing was seen. I searched the whole area and then sat back to think this over. I must have watched that area for several minutes but nothing. As soon as I turned my back to head back to the house to put down the T-Scanner, CHOP! I turned immediately and as I did CHOP! I had a clear view of the back side of the woodpile but nothing moved. Yet the chops had been loud enough to feel as well as hear.

At this moment I began to have thoughts of Charlie's body mangled in a car wreck and his ghost finishing the splitting. Fortunately sanity returned quickly. I did go back to the house with the T-Scanner and heard two more whacks of the splitting maul. I returned and watched the pile closely but nothing happened. It seemed the ghost only chopped wood when I wasn't looking.

I had to figure this one out. The idea of a ghost getting away from me was too much for my ego. Yet I was completely out of ideas. CHOP! This time I was looking right where Charlie p73 stood while chopping and the sound seemed to come directly from that spot only 15 feet in front of me. Again I even felt the chop and again no wood fell.

considerable smaller nebula can be found two degrees north and 2.5 degrees east of Zeta Orionis, namely, M78. It appears as an unusual dim puff of diffuse light with a faint star near the center. A diffuse dark area can be seen using a ten inch aperture, but otherwise, the nebula is nearly featureless.

There is one globular cluster in the winter sky that merits observing, namely M79. Located about 3.75 degrees south and one p73 west of Beta Leporis, this object is visible in a 60mm as a small faint fuzzy ball of light. A six inch will reveal a few stars on the edges, while a ten inch makes it a beautiful sight, with many hundreds of stars being visible.

# Happy Holidays!



The Prairie Astronomer

c/o The Prairie Astronomy Club, Inc.

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Lincoln, NE 68501

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Special December Meeting Date  
Wednesday, December 26

# Observing Chairman's Report

by Dave Knisely

This was clearly impossible, a sound this loud had to involve a rather strong movement of something yet nothing moved. Now I was mad. I had to gather my wits and figure out what facts I did have. First the sound came when I was not in the immediate area or was very still for some time. It never came when I was moving around. Secondly it came from the area of the woodpile. This brought up the idea it may have come from the woodpile instead of beside it. After several quiet minutes, CHOP! Yes, it did come from the pile itself rather than the area in front of it. I had been so engrossed with the idea the sound came from where Charlie always chopped wood my brain had heard it from there but that last chop clearly came from the woodpile itself. This coupled with the first fact seemed to indicate another run in with Minnesota wildlife. But what animal chops wood?

Woodchucks often lived under Charlie's wood but they can't make any sound like chopping wood. No animal can. Yet something was. Now I was really mad, no animal was going to do this to me and get away with it.

CHOP! Blast it, I wasn't looking that time as I was thinking too hard about wood chopping woodchucks. This went on for a good 20 minutes with maybe a dozen more chops but nothing seemed to be moving and the sound still came from the woodpile. But I did finally see something. There were a lot of pine rosin sealed pinecones lying all around the woodpile. There was a 100 foot tall Red Pine directly over the woodpile and they were Red Pine pinecones so that might not seem odd but it is. Pinecones don't drop until after they open up and drop their seeds. This wouldn't happen until next spring. The tree seemed healthy so why was it dropping its cones early and what connection could this have to the wood chopping?

As I was mulling this over, I finally caught the wood chopping ghost in the act. I saw a cone falling from near the top of the tree. It landed directly on top of the tarp pulled tightly over the woodpile. CHOP! It hit the tarp which acted just like a huge base drum. A rosin sealed cone can weigh a half pound and is more like a rock than a pine cone. Falling 100 feet it carried a lot of potential energy which was released in a reverberating CHOP!

The ghost was a red squirrel squirreling away a his winter food supply. Soon he came down and started gathering up the cones he had so painstakingly cut from the tree. He took them into his stash under the woodpile!

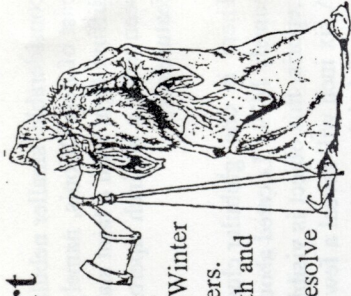
I can't help but wonder how many ghost stories are the result of someone taking the easy way out and saying: "What else could it have been but a ghost?" It took me well over 30 minutes to solve this one and I don't believe in such things. I have to have a rational explanation but so many, nearly ignorant of science and the ways of science will take the easy way out and make headlines doing it.

How many have you heard say about science or math? "I don't understand that stuff, it's only for eggheads anyway." Yet, no one says this about reading skills! It's not acceptable to be illiterate but it is acceptable to brag about being illiterate of science and math. Maybe it is the way it is taught in school, but somehow most have the idea such literacy isn't needed in their day to day lives. These same people get taken for billions of dollars a year by advertising claims, products and get rich schemes that they never would have fallen for if they had such literacy. Yet they blame the promoters of such crap rather than their own illiteracy. What's worse, they are voters on issues affecting education, acid rain, space exploration, nuclear waste, science and technology, etc. We are already losing the technology race with Japan and our grip on pure science is dangerously weak.

I don't know what the answer is but at least this is one ghost story that won't get into the tabloids.

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The Prairie Astronomer is published monthly by the Prairie Astronomy Club, Inc., and is free to all club members. Membership status and expiration date are listed on the mailing label. Membership dues are: Junior Members and Newsletter Only Subscribers...\$10/yr; Regular Members...\$24/yr; Family Memberships...\$27/yr; Address all new memberships, renewals, or questions to THE PRAIRIE ASTRONOMY CLUB, INC., P.O. BOX 80553, LINCOLN, NE 68501. For other club information contact one of the following officers: Dave Knisely (Pres)223-3968, Eric Hubl (V. Pres)423-6267, Ron Veys (Sec)486-1449, Lee Thomas(Treas)483-5639, Jack Dunn (2nd V. Pres)475-3013. All newsletter comments and articles should be sent to Newsletter Editor JOHN LORTZ, 12023 PARKER PLZ #105, OMAHA, NE 68154 no later than 7 days before monthly club meetings. Club meetings are held the last Tuesday of each month at Hyde Observatory in Lincoln, NE.



STAR PARTIES WILL BE HELD JANUARY 11TH AND 18TH AT THE ATLAS SITE. Start your Winter observing with some of Auriga's best open star clusters.

One of the brightest is M37, located five degrees south and 1.5 degrees west of Theta. Although visible in small binoculars as a fuzzy spot, this cluster is difficult to resolve in small telescopes. It is very rich and fairly compact showing over a hundred stars in a six inch. Its near triangular shape and orange star near the center reminds me a bit of M11. Also in Auriga is the bright cluster M38, located 1.5 degrees south and a half east of Sigma. This is an easy to resolve group of fairly bright stars which shows a peculiar 4r wedge-shaped gap on the north side. Over a hundred cluster members are visible in a six inch, with larger instruments revealing a little color in the brighter stars. In the same field, about half a degree south of M38 is the small cluster NGC 1907. It is tough to see and resolve in small instruments, with an eight inch revealing it as a tiny rich ball of moderately faint stars in a rich field. This object is much like the companion to M35, NGC 2158, except that NGC 1907 is easier to resolve.

About 1.5 degrees east of 16 Aurigae is the open cluster NGC 1893. Small instruments will show it as a moderate sized group of about 15 faint stars, while an eight inch will reveal 25 to 30 member stars. A ten inch will show some hints of hazy nebulosity, but a nebular filter is required to really show the nebula well. Much light and dark detail then becomes visible, making an average cluster into an above-average object.

The second hardest messier object for the beginner to observe seems to be M1, the Crab Nebula, located one degree north and a half west of Zeta Tauri. I have seen it in a pair of 10x50 binoculars, but it is still difficult to see in a 2.4 inch due to its low surface brightness. It usually looks like a dim fuzzy "W" shaped patch of nebulosity in most telescopes, with really large instruments just making the edges look a bit tattered. Higher power sometimes helps reveal faint detail in this object.

Of course, the best nebula in the northern sky is M42, located in the middle of the sword of Orion. Small telescopes give surprisingly good views of this gas cloud if low enough magnification is used. Those with larger instruments and nebular filters often look for the faint outlying filaments and patches that make this object so pretty, but many neglect observing the central core. This region is particularly spectacular when viewed at very high power in larger apertures, showing an incredible wealth of both light and dark detail. I recently viewed the core at 230x in my ten inch, and the sight was absolutely breathtaking. A

PRAIRIE ASTRONOMY CLUB, INC. FINANCIAL STATEMENT: November 30, 1990

	<u>BEGINNING CHECKING ACCOUNTS BALANCE 12/1/89</u> \$1,048.00
	<u>Operating Income</u>
	Membership dues Sales to members Sales at Observatory Observatory Sales Taxes Observatory Donations Donations to PAC Subscriptions to: Astronomy Telescope Making Deep Sky Atlas Site Key Fees Miscellaneous Income \$1,325.00 \$349.47 \$603.49 \$34.64 \$299.88 \$149.22 \$140.00 \$40.00 \$56.00 \$300.00 \$0.00 <b>\$3,297.70</b>
	<b>TOTAL OPERATING INCOME</b>
	<u>Operating Expenses</u>
	Sky & Telescope Subscriptions Hyde Observatory Trust Fund Sales Taxes Postage Newsletter Expenses Hyde Observatory Stock Member Sales Items Astronomical League Dues P.O. Box Rental Subscriptions to: Astronomy Telescope Making Deep Sky Atlas Site Expenses: Property Taxes Insurance Miscellaneous Miscellaneous Expenses \$832.00 \$413.07 \$34.59 \$25.00 \$0.00 \$445.80 \$323.71 \$117.65 \$28.00 \$154.00 \$56.00 \$56.00 \$50.45 \$314.15 \$43.22 <b>\$2,893.64</b>
	<b>TOTAL OPERATING EXPENSES</b>
	<u>NET OPERATING INCOME</u> \$404.06
	<u>ENDING CHECKING ACCOUNTS BALANCE 11/30/90</u> \$1,452.06
	MONEY MARKET BEGINNING BALANCE 12/1/89 MONEY MARKET ENDING BALANCE 11/30/90 INTEREST INCOME \$2,769.34 \$2,939.58 \$170.24 <b>\$574.30</b>
	<b>TOTAL INCOME (LOSS), FISCAL 1989-1990</b>

## President's Message

by Dave Knisely

Ah Christmas! This holiday, more than any other, takes me back to my beginnings as a young amateur astronomer. I got my first "good" telescope on Christmas morning 22 years ago, and for several nights afterwards, I would just sit in a lawn chair in the back yard under a cold December moon with my brand new 2.4 inch refractor, feeling an incredible sense of power. This was MY TELESCOPE, the long awaited instrument that would take me to the stars!

Often, I would wonder eagerly just what views awaited me as I sat in the cold. I had visions of Martian markings and Saturnian rings, of distant nebulae and galaxies, just waiting for me to explore. It was a little disappointing when I found out just how difficult and dim Deep Sky objects were, but that feeling of power still remained, egging me on to go deeper and fainter. I learned most of the techniques I use today to push my vision to its ultimate limits on that little 2.4.

I have long since gone to using large apertures and fancy filters for much of my viewing, but I still have my little beat-up 2.4, stored in my closet. On its side are the faint marks of the tape I used when I strapped a 2 inch reflector to it, and the dent in its tube tells of when it crashed against the mount of my eight inch after the cradle broke. I still have the crude drawings I made with it and the notes I took while learning where things were.

My 2.4 inch refractor reminds me of my beginnings, and helps me realize just how incredibly far I have come in this wonderful hobby of mine. At star parties, some people seem amazed at how quickly and easily I find faint and obscure objects without star charts or setting circles. They are sometimes astounded when I correctly identify the number of a faint galaxy after only a single glance. I owe all this ability to one very special Christmas gift given so many years ago, and to the years of wonderful experience which it gave to me. To this day, it is the best gift I ever received.

## A Note From Lee...

The RASC Handbooks have arrived, and will be distributed at the December meeting, Wednesday the 26th. As of December 15th, we had not yet received the Astronomical Calendars from Ottewell--apparently they had some printer trouble, and shipments have been delayed. I am hoping they will be available for distribution on the 26th as well. They did send the Astronomical Companion ordered by one member. NOTE: All items have been pre-ordered and paid for. ONE spare RASC handbook (ordered to meet the minimum quantity for discount) will be sold to the first person who pays for it.

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## A Note From the Editor...

Yes, it's Christmas time again, that special time of the year that everyone is of good cheer and in the giving mood! Well, since you ARE probably in the giving mood I don't want to pass up the opportunity to ASK the club members for newsletter article submissions! There's always lots of space here in the Prairie Astronomer for your stories, observations, and comments. I'll even print bad stuff about me! So, how about starting the year off right, with your name in italics below an article!

And one more note... the Financial Statement you'll find on the next two pages was formatted, printed, and submitted by Lee Thomas who has entered that strange and wonderful world of document formatting. I think Lee did a great job!