

SNAKE RIVER SKIES

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New MVAS Officers for 2002

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Yearly membership is \$20 per person \$20 per family \$10 per student, Sponsor \$100

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



March is our Messier Marathon month. It is the only time of year when all 100 Messier celestial objects are available to view at some time in one night. The 18th century French comet hunter, Charles Messier, kept running into smudges in the sky that were obviously not comets. He cataloged them so that other sky hunters wouldn't mistakenly claim these objects as comets. His compilation became known as the 110 Messier objects, making Charles Messier a celebrity of sorts—certainly a household name for astronomers.

Each March, astronomy organizations around the world host Messier Marathons, where they gather to spy as many of the 110 as they can. Some on the list are quite easy, such as M45 (the Pleiades), others not so. The first object to shoot for in a Messier Marathon is M74 but you must hurry to catch it before it disappears into the sunset glow. The last object, M30 in Capricornus, is also very difficult because it only appears in the rising light of the morning sunrise.

The best Messier Marathoner we have ever seen is our own MVAS member, Chris Sutton. Chris has missed by one object the last two years of finding all 110 in one night. Last year a pesky crescent moon hid one object, and the

year before he missed M30 because it refused to peek out from a low lying sunrise cloud. Watching Chris do his stuff is amazing.

Join us this year as we will do Messier Marathoning Friday and Saturday March 15-16 at the Jerome Gun club. Saturday March 16th, the Bruneau Dunes State Park is hosting a Messier Marathon at the lower campground not far from the observatory. Many Idaho astronomers will gather there for fun and some good dark skies. A potluck chili dinner will be served in the afternoon. Messier Marathons are great fun, even if you only do a couple hours worth of object hunting.

One last note about our next meeting on Saturday March 9th at 7PM and the Herrett Center classroom. There is a new comet visible in the western skies just after sunset. In order for us to get a good glimpse, we'll interrupt our meeting midway through to get a good look at it then return to the classroom to wrap up. Should be fun. The comet is magnitude 6 right now, but experts say magnitude 4 is very possible.

Clear skies and see you March 9th!

Jay Sneddon
President, Magic Valley Astronomical Society

If you plan to participate in the Marathon, be sure to

bring some snacks, a red flashlight, and plenty of warm clothes.

*Once you have survived a
Messier Marathon you
are always hooked.*

March 9 the Annual Messier Marathon Briefing

No one says you have to spend a cold March night under the sky to try to pick out the entire list of Messier deep sky objects. However, once you have survived a Messier Marathon you are always hooked.

A Messier Marathon can actually happen most any time of the year, providing you avoid nights with strong moon glow and of course clouds and city lights. Time your event in

March and you can maximize your chances to see them all.

Even if you do not wish to go through a grueling night to find them all, it is still very beneficial to have a solid knowledge of the objects that make up the Messier Catalog and where in the sky to find them.

Last year's marathon was interrupted by the most spectacular Auroral display Idahoans have seen in

many years.

This year's marathon promises to be interrupted by the very object the Comet Ferret was trying to find, comets. Comet Ikeya-Zhang is causing a great deal of interest.

Come out and learn about the fascinating objects that make up the Messier Catalog.

Comet Ikeya-Zhang

Explanation: Comet Ikeya-Zhang is presently heading north in planet Earth's sky, framed by stars of the constellation Cetus. The comet was discovered as a faint, telescopic object near the western horizon on the evening of February 1st independently by

Kaoru Ikeya of Shizuoka prefecture, Japan, Daqing Zhang in Henan province, China, and later by observer Paulo Raymundo of Salvador, Brazil. But Ikeya-Zhang is expected to brighten significantly and in March and April could become visible to the unaided eye. This picture, taken near Tucson, Arizona, USA on the evening of February 9th, covers a field a bit less than the width of the full moon showing the comet's condensed coma and narrow, developing tail. Ikeya-Zhang should pass closest to the Sun (perihelion) on March 18 at a point roughly midway between the orbits of Mercury and Venus. Based on preliminary calculations of this comet's orbit, Ikeya-Zhang is suspected of being a periodic comet, returning to the inner Solar System every 500 years or so. In fact, it is *speculated* that Ikeya-Zhang may be directly connected with a historic bright comet seen in 1532



*Special Treat for this year's
marathon may be this comet.*

Source APOD 2/21/2002

News from Space.com

NASA's flagship Hubble Space Telescope will be shut down in orbit for the first time Wednesday before spacewalking astronauts attempt to swap out the electrical heart of the observatory. And in what could be a disaster in the making, NASA officials are not entirely sure ground controllers will be able to power the telescope back up. Look for John Grunsfeld and Rick Linnehan to set out about 1:30 a.m. EST (0630 GMT) on a spacewalking bid to remove and replace the telescope's Power Control Unit. Similar to a household breaker box, the power switching station routes electricity from Hubble's solar wings to its science instruments, control systems and batteries. A failed change-out, meanwhile, could leave Hubble a powerless piece of space junk.



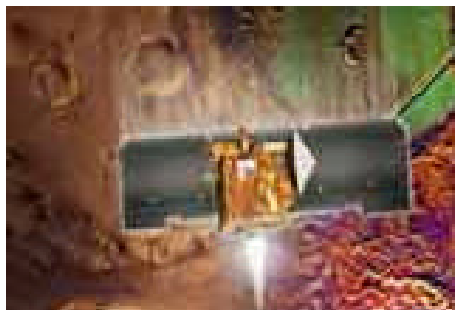
Odyssey Discovers Water Ice on Mars

Mars holds vast stores of water ice right near the surface and away from the permanently frozen south polar ice cap, scientists said today in announcing first major science findings from NASA's Mars Odyssey spacecraft.

The discovery makes it all the more possible that life may have once existed on Mars or could still be supported.

"There's a lot of ice on Mars," said William Boynton, a University of Arizona researcher who is the principal investigator for the Gamma Ray Spectrometer suite of instruments, used to make the discovery. "We really have a whopping large signal."

That signal is of hydrogen, one component of water. Boynton and his colleagues are confident the new measurements represents actual water ice at the surface and down a few feet. They said, however, that additional observations are needed to confirm the results.



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We're on the Web at MVAS.net

WHAT IS IN THE SKY FOR MARCH 2002

Only because there is a gap between Gemini and Leo was the dim constellation of Cancer conceived. Despite its lack of bright stars Cancer contains the very impressive beehive cluster, also called Praesepe.

Four planets can be seen in the evening sky. Bright Jupiter starts its eastward movement through Gemini. Saturn keeps its path through Taurus and is still a very impressive sight, the real lord of the rings. Both planets are near their east quadrature (90° east of the sun). This makes the transits of Jupiter's moons more impressive and gives Saturn's rings more depth.



The month March is named for the god of war and Mars will be traveling the length of Aries this month. Venus will start to appear in the early evening sky for its debut this year as the evening star.

Many people do not realize that besides being a very handy asterism to tell the direction, time, or date, most stars that make up the big dipper (excluding Dubhe, and Alkaid) are members of a star

cluster. Other possible members include Gemma in Corona Borealis, Menkalinan in Auriga, Zosma in Leo, Cursa in Eridanus and possibly even Sirius.

Vernal Equinox happens at 12:17PM MST on March 20th with the sun in Pisces.

Astronomical Calendar 2002

Don't forget to pay your dues. We are in the process of reviewing our mailing lists and we do not want to leave you out.