

Fall n' Stars 2009 – the Night of the Bolide

By Mark Coady

For the fourth year in a row I represented the Peterborough Astronomical Association on the organizing committee for the annual Fall n' Stars star party held at Camp Sagonaska, a Boy Scout camp within Colonel Roscoe Vanderwater Conservation Area, near Thomasburg, Ontario – some 20 km north of Belleville. This year the event was held on the weekend of September 25th – 27th.

I arrived just before noon on the Friday and, after greeting the others from the organizing committee, set up my camp then went to work with my normal duties. These normally include cleaning, stocking and maintaining the outhouses with toiletries and illuminating them with red and orange glowsticks (so our night vision is not affected). I also run the annual 50/50 draw which netted \$44 for the winner this year.

Conditions on Friday were great with some solar observing being done – yes, there were two sunspots to view plus a number of prominences. Night time observing was spectacular. It was a clear and crisp night. I had to keep my dew heaters running all night as there was much moisture in the air but it did not seem to affect viewing.

Doug Angle had Kingston Centre's 24 inch Dobsonian set up. Despite the fact that you have to climb a step-ladder to view the heavens, there was a constant line-up for viewing. The PAA's own Valerie Mathias was constantly in the line-up, comparing the views she got through this massive scope with her four and a half inch reflector. I also got to view through it and for the first time noted the Veil Nebula with great detail.

A fire was set in the woodstove in the longhouse to have it act as a warming room. While I was sitting in there, looking out a west facing window, a green flash, about the size of a basketball, flew by heading southwest. There was a great roar from the outside and Dave Cotterell of Belleville RASC came in exclaiming "Did you see that bolide?" I was the only one in the room who saw it.

I turned in to my tent and sleeping bag around about midnight – expecting to get up for some early morning viewing as the first quarter moon would have set. I was warm enough in my sleeping bag but got the constant feeling that dew had come through the tent. Only upon arising just after 4:30 AM did I realize that, with my constant tossing and turning to stretch out and get comfortable, I had kicked out some tent poles and the whole thing had collapsed on me. The following night I slept on one of the bunks in the longhouse.

Early Saturday morning viewing showed Orion in all its splendour and a rising Venus. Despite the cool temperatures (below 0 Celsius) it was an awesome spectacle – especially considering that I had a fleece jacket on instead of a toque, parka, and mittens if I had been viewing Orion on a January evening.

Shortly after dawn the clouds started to roll in and by the evening there was a constant rain. Despite this there is much to do and see at Fall n' Stars.

In the late morning there is a swap-table set up. I sold a pair of 7X35 binoculars to Susan Gagnon of Kingston. In the early afternoon there were four presentations in the longhouse including one by the PAA's own John Crossen on Buckhorn Observatory. A group photo is taken just before dinner.

Throughout the day there are astrophotos on display where everyone gets a single ballot to vote for your favourite. The ballots are counted after dinner and the prize for the most popular is awarded. This year the winner, Greg Liske of Belleville RASC, won an Acuter Planetary Imager.

The catered Saturday banquet is something that should not be missed. You have your choice or Roast Beef or Turkey (or both) with all the trimmings and desert (with seconds, thirds, fourths available) for the absolute steal of \$20.

After the astrophotography award is given out, the door prizes are drawn. Everyone walks away with at least one prize – I got a 60mm spotting scope.

With the rain coming down some people left to go home while a number of us sat around the longhouse talking and laughing about the weekend – my lowly tent seemed to be the main target.

The following morning, after complimentary coffee and juice, the camp is given a once over so that we leave it better than we found it then we lock up and go home. I was on the road around 10:00 AM.

This year the PAA was represented by Rick Stankiewicz, John Crossen, John Galle, and Valerie and Peter Mathias, as well as yours truly. I'll definitely be back next year and I hope more of you will come then, as well.