

In part three of How I Do What I Do, I will discuss preplanning your upcoming observing session.

Once I have determined an Astronomical League observing program to do, I use my Deepsky Astronomy Software (DAS) program to create an observing list of all the targets of this program. This allows me to easily enter my observations of each object and print a summary report, showing when I observed each object of the list. Once I have observed an object on the list, I create a second list for this observing club, removing any object already observed on this list and is named What's Left to Observe list.

The other advantage of having this list in the DAS program is that I can then print a complete set of finder star charts for the observing program. I print them all and put them into a 3 ringed notebook for later use. I also print a report of the What's Left to Observe list and keep it in this notebook also.

I now watch the moon cycle, for 3rd quarter through new moon, and choose a couple of weekends that this phase of the moon falls on. I use the television weather reports, the NWS reports and watch the Clear Sky Clock for the location I am planning to drive to. I most often drive to the Pawnee Grasslands, so I can put Briggsdale, CO into the NWS local forecast to see the long range predictions of the weather. If the weekend looks favorable for going out to observe, I start to preplan my observing session.

I now choose about 60 objects from the list that will be in a favorable position in the sky to observe. A favorable position means that they are at least 45 degrees above the horizon in the western or eastern sky. I choose objects so that as the night progresses, they will "rotate" into this 45 degree area of the sky.

I now list these 60 objects on a separate piece of paper, including their magnitude, so I have an idea of how "faint" these guys are. I also list for each object, the page number in the Night Sky Observer's Guide that the object is referenced on. This is for when I need to read a description of an object, I can quickly find the page number to read. Once you are under the night sky, you don't want to be fumbling through paper, looking for something in red light. It's a hard thing to do and wastes valuable dark sky time.

I then pull the star charts for these 60 objects out of the notebook and have them available for easy reference when I am ready to find the object.

You are ready to observe. Now all you need is for the weather to cooperate.

A few months ago, Dick Mallot gave a nice presentation of what you should take with you when you go out observing. I will not reiterate those lists here, for they are posted on our LAS web site. But you do need to make your own list of those things that you take out with you time and time again. Have this list at your vehicle when you are loading it and you will not find out later you forgot something.

I keep my books and other small items in a clear, plastic tub. All my preplanned observing notes are in this tub. All I have to do is grab the tub and I know all my charts and other observing supplies are in the vehicle. It also helps keep your items dry if you are caught in a sudden rain storm. I saw this once, and the person was so busy stowing their scope that they didn't have time to put their books away.

I also have purchased a fishing tackle box. I keep my eyepieces, extra batteries, pencils, and other small observing items in this box. It too, once loaded into the vehicle, will have all your observing items on their way to the dark sky site. In fact, I have two other cases that hold finder scopes, brackets, radios and other small items I like to take with me. So, I load four "cases" of stuff, and I am almost ready to start the engine.

I usually pack some warmer clothes, even in the summer, so that when the temperature falls throughout the night, I can be comfortable. Don't forget this when going to Fox Park, WY. The temperature can be 85 degrees in the day time and 20 degrees at night, with ice on your telescope. So, when going to this dark sky site, consider taking your winter gear with you. I always do. If you don't need it, it stays in the car. Just ask Ken Tryon how uncomfortable a night at Fox Park can be with just a light jacket.

My hourly observing rate is about 5 objects an hour. It takes me some time find the objects, then I like to look at the object with different powers of magnification and different filters, if the object behaves differently to being filtered. For instance, Planetary Nebulae sometimes show better with an OIII filter. I often draw what I see in the eyepiece, so that adds to the time I spend on one object.

I take many breaks throughout the evening, to wonder to other peoples' scopes to see what they are looking at. I also just sit back and gaze at the beautiful stars one sees when they get away from city lights. Its during these breaks I'll break out a snack.

Don't forget snacks. Hot drinks in a thermos. Sandwiches. Sweets. These are all good things to take out with you. Try to take items that are easy to open in the dark and are not too messy. I once tried to take that prepackaged, individual serving beef sausage sticks with me and that stuff is tough to get open in the dark. I made some sandwiches once, and wrapped them in sticky paper like Glad Wrap. There were also difficult to open in the dark.

Preplanning your outing is the key to a successful, fun filled evening. And if the sky doesn't behave itself, you can sit in the dark, eat the snacks you brought and visit with those that have ventured out with you.

Hanging out with astronuts on the plains of Colorado is one of my favorite things to do. Hopefully, it will become one of yours.