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ALCON 2010

Astronomical League Convention and Expo

International Dark-Sky Association Annual General Meeting

Tucson Hilton East

Tucson, Arizona

By Thomas Watson

When I first joined the Tucson Amateur Astronomy Association in 2004, I was given the option of also paying for a membership in something called the Astronomical League. Unfamiliar with the group, I asked the membership secretary what the League was all about, and was directed to their website for a more complete answer than could be given in a short time. After looking the website over I decided that the modest increase in membership fee seemed worthwhile. Since then I have incorporated four of the AL observing clubs into my own observing program and found them (and their associated in-house publications) to be a very effective means for both organizing observations and keeping myself motivated through the pursuit of defined goals. Membership also brought their publication – *The Reflector* – into my mailbox several times a year. Once a year, *The Reflector* is dominated by news of the most recent AL convention, ALCON. It looked like these gatherings were quite enjoyable, but unfortunately my ability to travel any distance these days is limited, so I had to content myself with reading about them.

That changed when the announcement was made that the 2010 rendition of ALCON would be held here in Tucson, hosted by my own local club. It was to be held in conjunction with the 2010 IDA general meeting. The combination presented an opportunity that was simply too good to pass up.

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Figure 1. Registration proceeded smoothly



Figure 2. TAAA Information Table

Starmaster
 Stellar Optical
 Stellarvue
 Steven's Optical
 Sun River Nature Center
 Telescope Solutions
 Tele Vue
 Telescope House
 Telescope Warehouse
 Think Astronomy
 TMB Optical
 Tscopes
 University Optics
 Walt's Observing Chairs
 Woden Optics

ALCON, June 24 – 26

The convention actually started out on June 24th with a day-long council meeting, then a visit to David Levy's *Jarnac Observatory* in Vail, not far east of Tucson, Arizona. The workaday world prevented me from attending these two events, so for me the convention began on Friday, June 25th.

Registration was quick and painless, partly because I paid in advance, but mostly because the volunteers behind the desk (from all three organizations involved) had matters well in hand. Almost as soon as I had the registration packet and t-shirt (yep, been there, done that, got the t-shirt), it was time to sit down in the hotel ballroom for the opening remarks and the first presentation of the day. The co-chairs of the TAAA committee that put the convention together – Robert Gent and Keith Schlottman – spoke briefly to set things up, then introduced David Eicher, editor-in-chief of *Astronomy* magazine. His talk was an overview of where the current hot topics of astronomy stand at the moment, and how these breakthroughs might be used to excite public interest in astronomy. This set a theme that echoed throughout the convention, that of public outreach as a tool available to amateur astronomers to increase awareness of astronomy, and science in general. Photographer [Wally Pacholka](#) then shared some of his experiences in producing his

amazing nighttime images. These pictures, if you are not familiar with his work, need to be seen to be believed – hence the link. Katie Moore, a past AL award winner and now employed by the National Air and Space Museum, recounted efforts to build an astronomy outreach program, including a small observatory, in perhaps one of the most unlikely locations imaginable – [well-lit Washington DC](#). What she and her colleagues have been able to accomplish under often trying circumstances is admirable. The status of the [Large Binocular Telescope on Mt. Graham near Safford, Arizona](#) was updated for us by Dr. Richard Green. I thought I had some idea of how massive this telescope was, but in listening to Dr. Green, I gained a very different perspective on its size (and potential capabilities). S&T editor J. Kelly Beatty provided a review of Pro-Am astronomy collaborations that generated a great deal of interest. I would not be surprised to learn that a few volunteers for such projects stepped forward from the audience. Byron Smith gave an overview of the collaboration between the Lowell Observatory and the Discovery Channel to build the [Discovery Channel Telescope](#), a project under construction near Happy Jack, Arizona – a place name I've somehow not encountered even though I've lived in the state for more than 30 years! One presentation detailed the development of the TAAA's new dark sky site, the Chiricahua Astronomy Complex. Also from the host club, Dean Salman gave a talk on new techniques in astrophotography, illustrated by some of his incredible images. The day's worth of presentations ended with a particularly energetic and informative discussion by Vivian White of the Astronomy Society of the Pacific. Her topic was the [Night Sky Network](#), appropriately entitled "Energize Your Astronomy Club." Somewhere in the middle of this information overload, many of us took a break to attend a luncheon that featured David Levy as a speaker. The talk was billed as an exploration of astronomy in literature. As is usually the case with David Levy, the talk was interesting and not entirely constrained by the title.



Figure 3. *Gathering for lunch*

During the rather brief breaks between presentations I managed to mingle with visitors and local club members, and browse the Vendor room, which was always quite busy. A mix of manufacturers, retailers, and organizations were set up in there, including OPT, Kitt Peak, the Astronomical League, local retailers Starizona and Stellar-Vision, and Celestron, to name a few.

The day ended with a star party out at the club's west-side dark sky site, a location that was, unfortunately, anything but dark that night – the Moon was Full. I was unable to join that activity, though I was told the next day that those who braved the moonlight and the heat (we hit 107°F in Tucson that day) were very much impressed by what we have available to us out here. (Too bad we couldn't take them out to Las Cienegas or the Chiricahua Astronomy Complex!)

Saturday the convention hit the ground running, even though some attendees were clearly sleep-deprived. Seems a lot of them had been up watching the lunar eclipse in the early morning hours. I elected to stick to the AL program, which included a brief but energetic AL business meeting. (Running concurrently were the Lunt Solar Systems *Arizona Solar Conference* and - Saturday afternoon - the IDA's *Lighting Ordinance Workshop*.) A presentation was made regarding the next ALCON, which will be held in [Bryce Canyon National Park](#), news that energized even those attendees who had been up watching the eclipse. Now that

location, all by itself, is what I call incentive to attend an ALCON! (And I do hope to be there, although with skies like that it's an even bet how many talks I'll be attending!) You might think that would be a tough act to follow, but Adam Block of the [Mt. Lemmon Sky Center](#) was more than up to it, presenting a wonderful mix of images, imaging techniques, and thoughts on how all of it could be used to teach astronomy.

A break followed, during which I finally visited the Lunt Solar Systems public viewing out by the pool. It was hot and sunny, so I did not mean to stay long. It didn't work out that way. This was my first experience with the Lunt solar telescope line, and I was most favorably impressed. There were four scopes, including the new (but not yet in production) 80mm model. The amount of detail I saw through the 80mm was mind-boggling, enough so that I was seriously overheated by the time I gave it up, and just made it back in time for the next talk.



Figure 4. *Solar viewing was the hot ticket on Saturday, in more ways than one!*

I must admit that I have my eye on that 80mm instrument, though it presents me a couple of challenges: first I'd need to come up with the funds, then I'd need to talk my wife into going along with it. (Come to think of it, that's really only one challenge.)



Figure 5. *The 80mm instrument*

Back in the air-conditioned hotel I rejoined the crowd in the main ballroom to hear an overview of the fifty-

year history of Celestron, as told by Celestron CEO Joe Lupica - an interesting tale all the way through. After a quick lunch, and more time browsing the vendor area, recent events on Jupiter (some of which were "caught" by amateur astronomers) were discussed and explained (with amusing touches and audience participation) by Dr. Richard Schmude.

This was followed by a presentation by the National Young Astronomer Award first-place finisher. The young people who receive these awards truly blur the distinction between amateur and professional scientists. The NYAA winner for 2010 photographed and analyzed stellar spectra to answer a question he had regarding the relationship between stellar temperatures and certain emission lines. His results were not what he had expected, which is science at its best. (I'm old enough to be his father, and I'm spending my time at the eyepiece drawing pictures with pencils!) It was one of the most impressive talks of the weekend.

The last speaker for the day was Dr. Connie Walker, who introduced us to a developing program designed by the IDA to educate the public on the topic of light pollution. Light pollution, like outreach, was a subject that came up time and again both days of the AL convention. This is beyond a doubt a largely unappreciated problem as far as the public is concerned. Bad as light pollution has grown to be, though, by the end of the second day I had come to the conclusion that progress is being made, awareness is being raised, and there is definitely hope for improvement in the near future. Her talk was, unfortunately, cut a bit short so the hotel could set up for the banquet.

During the break between Saturday's last talk and the awards banquet, the folk from Lunt Solar Systems held a drawing for a 60mm H-alpha solar telescope. All those who had purchased tickets (proceeds going to a local charity), including yours truly, gathered in the lobby and held our collective breath as lesser items (t-shirts, hats, etc.) were given away. Then all the tickets were dumped back into the box and the big winner was chosen. I don't recall the name of the fellow who won it, which of course tells you it wasn't me.

Speaking of big winners, the IDA recently promoted a membership drive by dangling the lure of a full set of Ethos eyepieces as a prize. The winner was in attendance, and even though he apparently knew he had won, the look on his face when he was handed that pile of eyepieces was worth the price of admission all by itself!

I also wandered some more through the vendor area. While I did not make any major purchases, that part of the convention proved to be an excellent way to meet people. I met, albeit briefly, many of the speakers, and had several long and interesting conversations with amateur astronomers from many places scattered across North America.



Figure 6. Vendor area



Figure 7. *A gaggle of telescopes.*



Figure 8. *A rather large telescope (CGE PRO 1400 HD)*

And then came the big dinner at the end of the AL portion of the weekend. The keynote speaker was Dr. Roger Angel from the University of Arizona's mirror lab. His talk was essentially about applying the techniques he had learned and developed over his career, to produce large telescope optics, to a system that might one day help add more efficient solar power to our slowly growing sustainable energy sources. I work at that same university, but was unaware that any of this was going on. I will definitely be looking into it in the near future. His [website](#) does a better job of explaining the matter than I am likely to manage.



Figure 9. *Settling in for the Awards Banquet*

The award part of the banquet involved the National Young Astronomers Award Program (NYAA) and the Jack Horkheimer Award Program. (For some details regarding the winners, go [here](#).) Current AL president Terry Mann performed a kinda-sorta ceremonial passing of the gavel to president elect Carroll Iorg. With the end of the banquet, the AL portion of the weekend came to a close.

IDA AGM 2010

Sunday was the annual general meeting of the IDA, and it was nice to see that most of the faces that had become familiar to me in the preceding days were still in attendance. After some opening remarks the final door prize was awarded, a Celestron NexStar 8SE with a Starizona HyperStar imaging system included to sweeten the deal. A local club member's ticket was drawn, and her reaction was to shout the word "Sweet!" in a way that rapidly took the sound out of the range of normal human hearing. No one seemed to hold this against her.

Dr. Tyler Nordgren was the first speaker of the day. I had an opportunity to meet him briefly the day before while purchasing a copy of his recently published book, *Stars above, Earth Below: Astronomy in the National Parks*. The talk was an interesting if brief review of the quickly evolving relationship between the U.S. National Park system and astronomy. The parks are looking at their dark skies as a resource and a tool for education. The developments here are truly encouraging, and I am looking forward to reading Dr. Nordgren's book. The next talk, given by Brandi L. Smith, followed up on the theme of the first by discussing the possibilities for nighttime recreation in national and state parks. It was clear by the end of it that this was a resource that could be better and more extensively used, and that it was in need of protection. The third talk, by Chad Moore, wrapped up the parks theme by detailing a project to develop a standardized sky quality index to be used to assess dark sky resources at national parks, among other places. By the morning coffee break it was clear that the relationship between amateur astronomy, the IDA, and the National Parks was truly dynamic, and that there are good things in the future of that relationship.

After the break we heard from Sherrilyn Jahrig and Gil Barteo about light pollution-related developments in Canada at the [Beaver Hills Dark Sky Preserve](#) and the efforts to make Alpine, Texas a dark sky community. Both talks were very encouraging, detailing progress that has been made. From farther afield we learned (from Martin Morgan-Taylor) about some recent developments in the UK and the Council of Europe "Initiatives in Obtrusive Light." From all of this it was made very clear that this issue is of global concern, and that many people around the globe are putting a great deal of effort into finding solutions.

Last of all, the potential problems lurking in the use of LED lighting rich in blue light was discussed by Chris Luginbuhl and Chad Moore. A recent IDA paper on the subject has apparently created some friction between the IDA and the lighting industry. From what was said, blue rich LEDs could be a major headache for those trying to preserve dark skies. It will be interesting to see where this goes. (For those so inclined, the paper can be found [here](#).)

The weekend event ended with the IDA luncheon, which was mostly about members meeting and greeting. It was announced that Clayton Lake State Park in New Mexico had received "Gold Tier" recognition for their efforts to preserve dark skies. The Goldendale Observatory State Park in Washington state received provisional status as "Silver Tier." These announcements, and the congratulations that went along with them, ended the luncheon. In all too short a time I found myself driving home, wondering how long it would take my brain to process all of the information I'd received over the past three days.

I'm still working on that.

More images from the event can be found by following the links below:

- <http://www.darksky.org/mc/page.do?sitePagelId=55060>
- <http://www.dropbox.com/gallery/5494531/1/ALCON%202010?h=2dacfd>

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