

EXPEDITION NEWS

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Air Traffic Controller is Raising a Crop of Solar Nerds

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Amateur and professional astronomers will go to any lengths to pursue their passion as we learned last month at the Northeast Astronomy Forum & Telescope Show (NEAF) in

Suffern, N.Y. Stargazers travel to one of the darkest skies in the world, the desert of Atacama, Chile, where local lodges host "star parties." Enthusiasts will journey to Hawaii in 2012 in pursuit of the transit of Venus; trek to the sunniest spot of the Australian Outback to view the 2012 eclipse; or build elaborate fiberglass "Astro Haven" domes in their backyards to control their telescopes from the comfort of the kitchen table, no matter the weather outside.

NEAF is where you can buy a 54 lbs. meteorite from Campo del Cielo, Argentina, for \$3,900. Or for those of modest means, meteorite particles the size of raisins for \$10. Astronaut Buzz Aldrin is represented with his signature Moon Explorer ED102 Air-Spaced Triplet Apochromatic Refractor Telescope from Bresser (\$1,999.95 sug. ret.).

Atlanta air traffic controller Stephen Ramsden's passion for the past four years is to teach solar education around the world, starting with presentations to schools in the U.S. southeast based out of his Ford-built Sun Specific Public Outreach Truck or "S.U.N.S.P.O.T." Ramsden's non-profit Charlie Bates Solar Astronomy Project, named for a fellow controller who committed suicide in 2007, reaches approximately 50,000 students a year at 60 schools. The Navy veteran owns 11 telescopes - about \$100,000 worth of observatory

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▼ 2011 (9)

▼ April (4)

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[Expedition News This Month - Return to Mariana Tre...](#)

[Students on Ice Announces 10th Anniversary Event, ...](#)

[Jeff Lowe's Pack Recovered After 20 Years on the E...](#)

▶ March (1)

▶ February (4)

quality telescopes and cameras including a Lunt Hydrogen Alpha Solar Telescope which can show sun prominences and surface detail.

▶ 2010 (27)


▶ 2009 (38)

Ramsden, who likes to dress in a yellow sun costume, is booked six months in advance by educators eager to have him teach about the sun's effects on aviation, communications and climate. He's lightly funded to say the least. The National Air Traffic Controllers Association supplies thousands of giveaway eclipse viewers, but otherwise the program's \$60,000 annual budget comes from small private donations and out of his own pocket. "I hate fundraising and would just as soon rip off my toenails than ask for donations for the program," he explains on his website.

"I'm trying to breed a new crop of nerds, attempting to get kids interested again in something real like science. We have a tight budget but it's worth it - the emotional reward comes back to me 12-fold," he tells us in between deflecting snarky comments about sleepy air traffic controllers. ("I guarantee no one falls asleep where I work. Atlanta Center is the busiest airspace in the world.")

Ramsden adds, "When the Sun cooperates with a 60,000+ mile filament or prominence or a large active region with sunspots there is no replacing the look on a kid's (or the faculty's) face after you explain the enormity and origin of the features."

(For more information: sramsden@solarastronomy.org, www.charliebates.org; see a photo of Ramsden at www.expeditionnews.blogspot.com)

POSTED BY JEFF BLUMENFELD, ED., EXPEDITION NEWS AT 9:37 AM 

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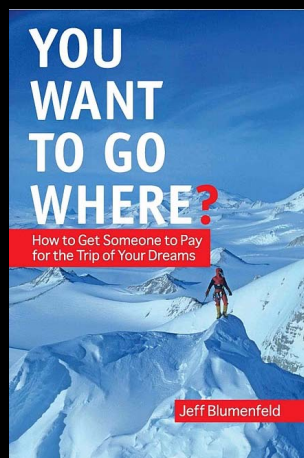
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