

The Skyscraper

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The Amateur Astronomical Society of Rhode Island

47 Peepthead Road
North Scituate, RI 02857

www.theskyscrapers.org

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See back page for directions to Seagrave Observatory.

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Email subscriptions:

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The Skyscraper

March 2003

March Meeting

Friday, March 7, 7:30pm at North Scituate Community Center

At our March meeting, our own member Dave Hurdis will give a presentation on his recent trip to Mauna Kea in Hawaii.

Directions to North Scituate Community Center:

North Scituate Community Center is the first building on the right side going south on Rt. 116, after the intersection of Rt. 6 Bypass (also Rt. 101) and Rt. 116, in N. Scituate. Famous Pizza is on the corner of that intersection. Parking is across the street from the Community Center.

Skyscrapers Calendar

Public observing is held on the 2nd and 4th Saturday of the month at Seagrave Observatory, weather permitting. Public Nights will resume a schedule of every Saturday night, clear or cloudy, beginning in April.

**March 7
Friday 7:30pm** March meeting at North Scituate Community Center

**March 8
Saturday 7:30pm** Public Observing Night at Seagrave Observatory

**March 22
Saturday 7:30pm** Public Observing Night at Seagrave Observatory

Upcoming Star Parties

Skyscrapers will be hosting a series of star parties this spring. Members are requested to volunteer to bring a telescope and share the sky for an hour or so with some wonderful kids. Some of these events have been occurring for a good many years now, and in a single evening we have shown the heavens to upwards of 300 hundred or so children and parents.

March 11, 2003 (Tuesday) 6:30 pm - 8:00 pm - Savoie School - East Woonsocket

March 13, 2003 (Thursday) 6:30 pm - 8:00 pm (rain date) - Savoie School - East Woonsocket

March 27, 2003 (Thursday) 7:00 pm - Callahan School in Harrisville

April 3, 2003 (Thursday) 7:00 pm - Steere Farm School - Burrillville

April 11, 2003 (Friday) 8:00 pm - 10:00 pm - Audubon Society - Greenville

May 9, 2003 (Friday) 8:00 pm - Seagrave Observatory

President's Message

Steve Hubbard, President

My fellow Skyscrapers, If you're like me, you probably feel like you've been hibernating for the last few months. With temperatures around zero and huge amounts of snow to trudge thru, it's been a lot harder to work up enthusiasm for observing. I have done a bit of stargazing, but find that I can't stay out as long as I normally would. This kind of intense cold has a way of really seeping deep into you and kind of takes something away from the pleasure of what we do. Maybe by July, we'll be able to go back to the observatory again.

One thing that we all have to look forward to this year is Mars. It will make the closest approach to Earth in almost 60,000 years and should prove to be spectacular in August. All of us should be starting to plan out how we

are going to view Mars now, because a chance to see it with as much detail as we will get is extremely rare. This will be a great chance to see the markings and polar caps and who knows, maybe some of our members will get to see a "canal" or two.

Here's hoping that we will get to have a meeting in March this year. As you may know, the one in February got canceled due to snow. This is just another reason why our email alert system is so important. If you have an email address and haven't given it to us yet, we urge you to please do so. When we have to cancel meetings or something special comes up, you don't want to lose out. Besides, you can get your Skyscraper in a much more timely manner this way too.

See you at the March meeting (if the weather cooperates this time)...

Saturn, the True Lord of the Rings

David A Huestis, Librarian

The spring sky the last few years has been dominated by two bright planets, Jupiter and Saturn. I'm happy to report that spring 2003 will be no exception. The only problem with observing these gas giants this year will be whether our portable telescopes will be tall enough to stand above the snow cover, or whether Seagrave Observatory will be snow free any time soon!!

We have plenty of time to observe Jupiter, so I'll write about him in my April column. Saturn, on the other hand, will spend less time in the evening sky. My suggestion is to start observing Saturn as soon as you can with your own instruments, then visit Seagrave Observatory when our parking lot is clear of snow. You don't want to miss this beautiful ringed planet this season.

"When Saturn is in view the owner of a telescope may become a recruiting officer for astronomy by simply inviting his friends to gaze at the wonderful planet," wrote Garrett P. Serviss in his 1901 book, *Pleasures of the Telescope*. Serviss' statement still rings true today. Let the word spread during a star party that Saturn is in view through a specific telescope and watch the line form. Despite being imaged up-close and personal by visiting spacecraft, Saturn can still draw a crowd to the telescope. Saturn's rings simply fascinate people.

Saturn can currently be found in the constellation Taurus, nestled between the horns of the Bull, just left of the Hyades star cluster. This V-shaped star grouping represents the face of the "Bull," and is accentuated by the red star Aldebaran which marks the Bull's eye. If you still have trouble locating Saturn, wait until the night of March 10-11 when the first quarter Moon will be within four degrees of our ringed wonder.

Your first glimpse will clearly reveal Saturn's magnificent ring system, whose southern face is now tilted open to the maximum limit possible to our line of sight. From now on the tilt will decrease until the rings are seen "edge-on" in 2009. Because the rings are now wide open, this configuration allows us to observe detail in their structure. Although there are hundreds of ringlets, you shouldn't have any difficulty seeing the separation between the primary A and B rings. Unfortunately your view cannot compare to what the Voyager I and II spacecraft imaged during their encounters with the planet, but the rings will still amaze you.

They are comprised of irregularly shaped dirty snowballs, ranging in size from grains of dust to many particles the size of pebbles. There are also some "boulders" as large as a few hundred feet. They orbit Saturn in the planet's equatorial plane.

Though the rings are the main attraction, you can also view the planet's salmon-colored cloud tops. Saturn would look very boring through a telescope without its ring system. The bands in its upper atmosphere are much less prominent than those of Jupiter. Very little cloud detail can be seen in small telescopes. One thing you can look for is the shadow of the planet projected onto its rings.

Saturn also has satellites you can observe. Its four brightest are Titan, Rhea, Dione and Tethys, and you can watch these moons orbit Saturn like a solar system in miniature. Titan, which orbits Saturn in 16 days, will be the brightest, and during its greatest elongations east or west of Saturn, can be easily spotted.

Enjoy the beauty of this magnificently ringed world just over one billion miles from our home planet.

Also, don't forget that the vernal equinox occurs on March 20 at 8:00 pm EST. Though that date and time signify the astronomical beginning of spring, I'd be amazed if Mother Nature didn't want to give up so quickly this year. After all, unless the weather patterns change drastically soon, and they can and do, especially when transitioning to the next season, it's going to take some time to melt the approximately 40 inches of snow in my front yard (February 19).

Spring will eventually get here and almost everyone will be happy when it does.

Now that you know how to locate Saturn in the sky, I trust you will try to observe it when the next opportunity arises. And furthermore, invite your family, relatives and neighbors out for a view as well and share the beauty of the universe with them. I'm sure they will appreciate your thoughtfulness for rescuing them from cabin fever. Just remember to provide them a shovel to help you clear a path to your observing location!!

Should you want to get a head start on observing Jupiter (the subject of next month's column), the great Jovian world will be the brightest object in the sky to the east of Saturn, very close to the Beehive cluster of stars, in the constellation of Cancer.

If you'd like to explore the universe with larger instruments, then by all means visit Seagrave Memorial Observatory on Peeptoad Road in North Scituate on any clear Saturday night once the parking lot is snow free. Our members will be happy to share their love of the sky with you. More information, including directions, membership, and snow closures, can be found at our website: www.theskyscrapers.org

As always, keep your eyes to the skies.

Directions to Seagrave Observatory

From the Providence area:

Take Rt. 6 West to Interstate 295 in Johnston and proceed west on Rt. 6 to Scituate. In Scituate bear right off Rt. 6 onto Rt. 101. Turn right onto Rt. 116 North. Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.

From Coventry/West Warwick area:

Take Rt. 116 North. Peeptoad Road is the first left after crossing Rt. 101.

From Southern Rhode Island:

Take Interstate 95 North. Exit onto Interstate 295 North in Warwick (left exit.) Exit to Rt. 6 West in Johnston. Bear right off Rt. 6 onto Rt. 101. Turn right on Rt. 116. Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.

From Northern Rhode Island:

Take Rt. 116 South. Follow Rt. 116 thru Greenville. Turn left at Knight's Farm intersection (Rt. 116 turns left) and follow Rt. 116. Watch for Peeptoad Road on the right.

From Connecticut:

- Take Rt. 44 East to Greenville and turn right on Rt. 116 South. Turn left at Knight's Farm intersection (Rt. 116 turn left) and follow Rt. 116. Watch for Peeptoad Road on the right.
- Take Rt. 6 East toward Rhode Island; bear left on Rt. 101 East and continue to intersection with Rt. 116. Turn left; Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.

From Massachusetts:

Take Interstate 295 South (off Interstate 95 in Attleboro.) Exit onto Rt. 6 West in Johnston. Bear right off Rt. 6 onto Rt. 101. Turn right on Rt. 116. Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.



**47 PEEPTOAD ROAD
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