

Escape into the Night Sky

THE SKY'S
THE LIMIT



NEEL ROBERTS

Tired of the everyday chaos of world? Ever dreamed of a life of passionate adventure? Want to get away from it all? Great news—the night sky offers you a healthy form of retreat from the four walls of today. My name is Neel Roberts, vice-president of the Big Sky Astronomical Society (aka the Vulcan Observatory which opened last fall by Twin Valley Reservoir) and Vulcan County will now enjoy the privilege of a monthly astronomy column every second Wednesday. This is not for high end scientists trying to earn another PhD, but if you think the night sky is cool and would like see how you can participate, you landed at the right page.

One question I am asked repeatedly is, "How do I get going? I'm interested but have no clue where to start?" I've been fascinated with the night sky since I can remember but my hang up was I always thought I was not smart enough to figure it out like the pros. I'm glad I was wrong for two reasons. First of all, astronomy is not a competition because with the uni-

verse at an estimated size of 13 billion light years across (one light year is just a tad less than six trillion miles in case you're wondering!) no one has figured it all out anyway. Second, with technology, you can learn fast in ways that are not painful. If you have a computer, there are a lot of free star gazing programs you can get by Googling "free astronomy software" but if you're willing to dip a bit into your wallet, you can start as cheap as \$24.95.

Have you thought about getting your own telescope or binoculars? There's so much to choose from out there that's another article in itself, but perhaps a few tips to narrow down the selection process. My collaborator Ken From, who writes "What's up Tonight" in the *Regional* is one of the best sources on telescopes, etc. I've met. He has an impressive selection on his farm by Didsbury (www.all-startertelescope.com) and a good starter scope can be had for about \$350. As a matter of fact he has a webpage set up especially for the first time buyer and he recommends getting Terence Dickinson's book, *The Backyard Astronomer's Guide*, which has details about buying your first scope. Terry is one of Canada's best known astronomers, astronomy educators and editor of *Sky News*. He has written more than 35 astronomy books including

the best selling *Night Watch*, which is still the best primer for someone beginning in astronomy. In a section of *Night Watch* that deals with astronomical equipment he writes about "Trash Scope Blues" and warns against purchasing the \$200 department-store telescope announcing 450-power and several accessories in a box with colourful photos of comets and planets.

Personally I have a loaded 11-inch Celestrone which can see Saturn during the day but I find I use my \$200 binoculars more because it's easier to set up and use. With a beginner telescope Ken recommends, you can actually see the rings of Saturn but it will be at night. You can stay in touch with celestial events by a variety of websites, but I recommend www.space.com. You can go the website whenever you want, but I recommend you sign up for its free newsletter, which arrives daily. It is an easy read and gives you the latest in a few minutes. They are hooked into reputable institutions like NASA and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, so you can be assured the quality of information is good.

2009 is the International Year of Astronomy and you can get the latest events at www.astronomy2009.org but on a more local level you can check out "Galileo Live" at the Telus World of

Science in Calgary <http://www.astronomycalgary.com/events/info/92>. Other planetariums across Canada will also be featuring this presentation and links to all the cities will be posted on the web. It is a wonderful drama and multi-media event with Galileo and the response to his use of the telescope in the early 1600s—400 hundred years ago.

If you're looking for a celestial showcase this month, be sure your eyes are on the Eastern horizon as the moon rises at about 5 a.m. on April 22. You'll witness a rare treat of the occultation of Venus by the moon which last happened a few years ago. There will be a thin crescent moon in the east and Venus and the moon should not be difficult to locate just before sunrise. The more dramatic event occurs when Venus appears to pop out from nowhere at the end of the occultation because the dark side of the moon appears as blue sky to us and Venus just appears in that blue sky. You should be able to see this with the naked eye, but binoculars will greatly assist.

Neel Roberts is vice-president of Big Sky Astronomical Society. The members meet once a month on Friday evenings by Twin Valley Reservoir and is the observatory for Vulcan County. Society members can be reached at info@bigsky.ab.ca.