

First Light Lite

September 1, 2022

Jim Lynch – Editor

Message from the CCAS President

Somehow, the summer wound down, and while it was a dry one on the Cape, it wasn't exactly the clearest one on record either, as far as viewing goes. But, such is our home, and finding observation windows between the clouds is part of it. I hope people got *some* viewing in!

This fall is (perhaps) the beginning of more normal times after two years of Covid enforced social distancing and isolation. Covid hasn't gone away totally, of course, but with vaccines and a seeming decrease in virulence, people are mostly willing to interact more. We will go with that model – make our usual interactions possible again, but respect if some people are still wary of contact.

Given that, we will try to get back on track with our hands-on activities – working with schools, having meetings (hybrid Zoom and in-person), doing star parties and public outreach, etc. But, I would propose that we also rethink things somewhat, given that two years have passed “in isolation” and that our world is now a slightly different place than it was before. I think that the CCAS needs to readjust, and I will offer some proposals below towards that end.

And, to insure that it is not a one-sided conversation held via a newsletter, I'd like to devote our September 1st meeting to discussing “Quo Vadis CCAS” – or for those who didn't have two years of Latin inflicted upon them – “where are you going, CCAS?” We don't have a formal speaker for September, and so we can take that as an opportunity to discuss a very important topic, our future. As I said, I'll offer some initial thoughts, and hope that you will add to them at our September (Zoom only, BTW) meeting. Let me go topic by topic, not necessarily in any order.

Star Parties revisited

As mentioned last month, we've signed a one-year extension of the existing contract between the Cape Cod Astronomical Foundation (CCAF, our non-profit organization legal component) and the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District (DYRSD), in order to allow time for long-term negotiations, we will have use of the Werner Schmidt Observatory (WSO) this coming year, and so will be planning star parties there in the near future (read "starting this fall.") But some changes must be made, and we also need "more hands on deck." Let me explain.

Over the past two years, we've been able to hold exactly two star parties – one at WSO this last October, when there was a brief 'Covid window' and one this last September at Joint Base Cape Cod, when Covid restrictions had relaxed some. Both were successful, with about thirty attendees, but obviously they were too few and far between.

This fall, we have two fairly significant events scheduled that will feature CCAS star parties as a major component – a "dark skies" event at the Cape Cod National Seashore on September 24th (rain date the 25th) and a series of star parties at the Upper Cape Tech as part of its adult education program, likely starting in October. To do these, and also to start rescheduling our normal monthly star parties at WSO, I think we need to "up our game" from our present capabilities. Let me be more specific.

Over the past few years, we have lost half a dozen club members (due to passing or family matters) who were experienced in using amateur astronomy gear and also were familiar with the Northern Hemisphere night sky. Due to Covid, we haven't been able to either recruit or train people in these skills over the past two years. But we need to do this, and the sooner the better. These skills aren't rocket science (to use the old saw), as amateur equipment is made to be layman friendly, and learning the night sky is only a matter of a night or two's observing. Charlie Burke and I are planning to get some sessions and material together soon to do just this, both at WSO and in Falmouth (where many members reside). This is a good discussion point, and we'd like further input.

Also, by doing this, we re-introduce our club members to the night sky and the fun of spotting and observing its wonders, using some of the very good gear that has been sitting dormant in our Observatory over the last two years!

School Projects and Activities

As mentioned in past newsletters, we have been unavoidably separated from the Cape's schools for two years, during which there has been a turnover in personnel and even in the directions that the curricula are going. We need to adjust to those changes, and work with the teachers to provide them with material that they can use in this "new era."

Since our DYRSD contract extension is now in place, we took the next step of talking to the DYHS teachers about directions and projects with their students for next fall. The talks on June 22nd were very productive, and we look forward to continuing them this fall. During the first part of September, DYHS will have STEM Week type activities, which we hope to participate in. We also have invited the science teachers to tour WSO, and hopefully become users of our facility. I think the challenge here is to envision some new ideas, and not simply copy what we had done in the past.

We also are continuing efforts to coordinate with other Cape Cod schools, especially Upper Cape Tech, with whom we are discussing interaction with their adult education program and also their astronomy course.

There are also other Cape schools we'd like to continue interactions with, and we will pursue those possibilities during the fall.

Elections

We are pleased to announce that George Silvis was elected to the at-large position on the CCAF Board during our last meeting.

Jim Lynch (President), Ashish Dutta (Vice-President), and Ken Brink (Treasurer) were re-elected to those positions for the coming year. Jonathan Hatch has volunteered to be the CCAS Secretary, and we'd like to have a vote during the September 1st meeting to make this formal. The Secretary's duties will include: 1)

maintaining our membership and mailing list, 2) keeping watch over our website calendar to make sure it is current, and 3) making notes on our meetings when he is present.

Member Activities and Retention

I think that one area that has suffered most during Covid, and maybe even a bit before, is the member contact and mutual astronomy activities that we shared previously. We've thankfully have been able to have great monthly talks via Zoom, but our in-person interactions (star parties, equipment "fixing and learning" days, work with students) have been minimal, to put it nicely. Sharing an interest with others is what makes clubs such as CCAS work, and in-person interactions are an important piece of the equation. I have 1-2 ideas about how to improve that area, which I'll put out here next.

One thought is that we have twice per year member meetings at both WSO and in Falmouth (where we have a large concentration of members) to both have a meal (could be lunch or dinner) and a session where a member shows others how to work with various pieces of amateur gear (e.g. astrophotography, solar scopes, spectroscopy, go-to mount equipment, the main scope at WSO, etc.). Having a standard "technical agenda item" will help (re)develop the overall skill level of club members, which is desirable from all angles.

Another possible in-person activity is to have a few "road trip" events, like going to NEAF (Northeast Astronomy Forum), Stellafane, or an eclipse. We've done this individually – perhaps doing it on a club-wise basis would be interesting.

Not all personal interaction needs to be in person, however, and I think we can use the web to good advantage as well. I would suggest adding a "CCAS Doings" section to the site where people can describe what they are up to on an individual basis, and share their experiences and results. Maybe this could be a reshuffle of the (never used) "Blogs" section.

Also, some more talks by members (once we get back to doing more activities) would be good, and we'll worth pursuing. We used to do a bit more of these in the past.

Website

We are actively working on upgrading our website, starting with the calendar, but also with attention to modernizing and upgrading the content. More on that to come soon.

Speakers

Last Month's Speaker (August)

Last month we did not have a formal speaker, but talked about coming events for CCAS. We will be doing the same this month, only with a bit more brass-tacks emphasis. Steve LaFlamme *did* provide some very nice technical content by going through some “quick” black and white Astro-photos he took from his home observatory. These were simple for him to do, but were no less spectacular for being in black and white! Thanks, Steve!

September

This month we don't have an outside speaker, but rather will again take some time to discuss the coming events for the fall, and specifically talk about detailed preparations. This fall is an important restart to our in-person activities, and we will need people to know what's going on, what to do, and be willing to come to these events and participate. We also will discuss other Quo Vadis items such as our website upgrade, our training sessions, etc. It won't be a long meeting, but the topics are important.

October

In October, we have James Lowenthal from Smith College speaking about gravitationally lensed distant starburst galaxies, and what the JWST might have to say about them. This will be a remote-only talk via Zoom.

November

In November, Martin Elvis from HSCfA will talk about his recent book, “Asteroids: How love, fear, and greed will determine our future in space.” This book will be distributed to any students attending the talk. It will be both live at DYHS and linked via Zoom.

December

In December, we will have Nathan Whitehorn from Michigan State University speaking to us about Neutrino Astronomy, a topic we haven’t heard about in our talks in the last few years. Zoom only.

Dues

If you have already paid your dues during this calendar year, thanks! You are up to date. If you are not sure, please check with Ken (kbrink@who.edu). To send dues, please mail to: Ken Brink, 16 Greengate Rd., Falmouth, MA 02540.