

Abstract

The NGC 3109 association is a nearly-linear group of dwarf galaxies located at the edge of the Local Group (d 1.4 Mpc). The origin of this group is unclear: is it an infalling dark matter filament, a set of 'backsplash' galaxies which have passed through the Milky Way, or a group of tidal dwarfs formed in a past Milky Way/M31 encounter? Distinguishing among these possibilities requires a complete accounting of the group galaxies group and their star formation histories. One of the 5 known association members was only recently discovered; we propose a deep MegaCam survey to search for additional galaxies. Some of these data can also be used to search for tidal features around the foreground (240 kpc) dwarf galaxy Leo I.

Science Justification

The large scale structure of our local universe is dominated by voids and filamentary structures of groups and clusters of galaxies (e.g., Courtois et al. 2013). Half of the Local Volume galaxies reside in loose groups and associations, such as the Sculptor filament and the Canes Venatici Cloud (Karachenstev 2005). The nearest such structure is the NGC 3109 association (see Figure 1), an association of 5 dwarf galaxies in Leo, Sextans, and Antlia (van den Bergh 1999; Tully et al. 2006). This galaxy association, with a linear extent of 1.2 Mpc across the sky (Bellazzini et al. 2013), lies just at the edge of the Local Group at a distance of 1.3–1.7 Mpc. The origin of the NGC 3109 association is discussed in detail by Pawlowski & McGaugh (2014), who identify several possibilities: an infalling dark matter filament, a pre-existing group tidally stretched by an encounter with the MW, or galaxies formed as tidal dwarfs from a past Milky Way/M31 encounter. Constraining the number and properties of additional group members can help to discriminate between these possibilities as well as confirm or refute the suggestion by Pawlowski & McGaugh (2014) that *all* of the non-satellite galaxies to the north of the Milky Way are confined to a single plane.

The time is right for a search for additional members of the NGC 3109 association. While the region is covered by existing and planned survey data, none are deep enough to detect the faint galaxies and structures at this distance. The most well-known recent examples of nearby dwarf galaxy discovery are from the SDSS (e.g., Koposov et al. 2008). However, despite lying within the SDSS footprint, the newest member of the NGC 3109 association, Leo P, was recently discovered as part of a blind H I survey (Giovanelli et al. 2013): it is simply too faint to be well-detected at the SDSS depth ($g = 22.2$, $i = 21.3$). Using LBT imaging of Leo P, McQuinn et al. (2013) measured the tip of its red giant branch to be at $i = 22.1$. Further south, tidal substructure near the Antlia dwarf suggestive of an interaction with NGC 3109 was recently discovered by Penny et al. (2012), at very low surface brightness levels. This suggests to us that additional faint members of the group as well as tidal debris from interactions between group members may await discovery.

The outcome of a search for additional members of the NGC 3109 association has important implications for understanding galaxy evolution. A lack of additional tidal debris could cast doubt on the ‘tidal dwarf’ explanation for the group’s existence, while a lack of additional bound-galaxy members of the group would strongly constrain the mass of a possible dark-matter filament or progenitor halo. On the other hand, finding additional members of the group would allow a better characterization of its spatial and dynamical extent; with only five currently-identified members, such studies suffer from small-number statistics. If additional group members lie close to the same plane as the existing members, this would tend to confirm the result of Pawlowski & McGaugh (2014). Identification of new members as potential ‘backsplash galaxies’ (Teyssier et al. 2012) might lend credence to Pawlowski & McGaugh’s claim that there is an ‘overabundant backsplash galaxy’ problem with Λ CDM. Additional group members would also allow better constraints on the group’s luminosity function and subsequent comparison to CDM simulations of galaxy formation in low-density environments.

The southern part of the NGC 3109 filament, from NGC 3109 to Sextans B, is expected to be observed with LSST. The northern portion of the NGC 3109 filament, from Sextans B to Leo P, requires deeper imaging than the available SDSS depth ($g = 22.2$, $i = 21.3$) in order to detect dwarf galaxies at distances beyond 1 Mpc. CFHT/MegaCam’s ability to go both wide and deep is essential for such observations: the nearby nature of the filament means that it covers a large area of sky, yet the expected faint dwarf galaxies are resolved into individual stars. Completing the substructure census and probing the faintest end of the luminosity function in the nearest filamentary structure are the goals of this proposal. Detected low-surface brightness structures will

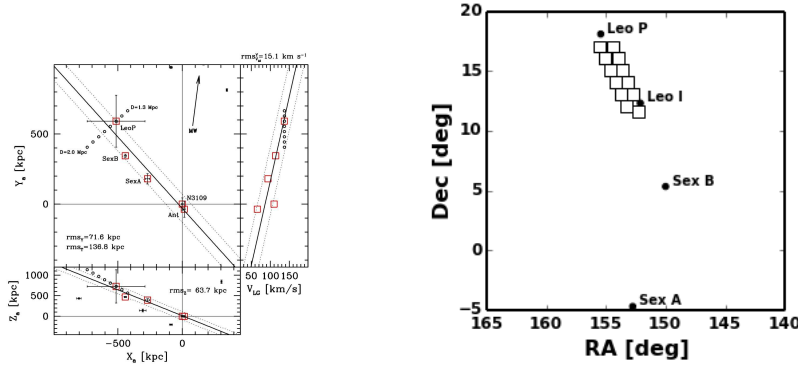


Figure 1: (Left) The NGC 3109 association shown in Cartesian coordinates centred on NGC 3109, from Bellazzini et al. (2013). (Right) Sky projection of the proposed observations. The boxes are 1-degree MegaCam fields; the black circles at the galaxy locations have 15-arcminute radii.

be characterized in terms of structural properties and their association to the sub-group will be pursued via tip-of-the-red-giant-branch (TRGB; Lee et al. 1993) measurements and, if possible, kinematical measurement.

References

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Technical Justification

As defined by Bellazzini et al. (2013), the NGC 3109 filament is distributed along a line extending from Leo P in the north ($\delta = +18^\circ$, $b = +54^\circ$) to Antlia in the south ($\delta = -27^\circ$, $b = +22^\circ$); Sextans B is about 3° to the west of this line. While galaxies belonging to the NGC 3109 association might not lie along the filament defined by the 5 known members, the structure provides the most obvious ‘lamp post’ under which to search for new members. The southern part of the filament will be observed with LSST (coverage to $\delta < +10^\circ$ to the necessary depth), but the northern portion is out of LSST’s reach. The SDSS coverage of the northern portion of the filament is of insufficient depth for our purposes. We have defined a series of Megacam pointings covering a $2^\circ \times 6^\circ$ region south of Leo P in the direction towards Sextans A and B; see Figure 2. This area subtends 44×136 kpc at the distance of the NGC 3109 association; for comparison, the tidal truncation radius of Sextans A is about 3 kpc (Bellazzini et al. 2014). As the Figure shows, our defined fields are also quite close to the more nearby (240 kpc) dwarf galaxy Leo I and can be used to probe the outer regions of this galaxy. The position of the field nearest Leo I has been adjusted slightly to avoid the bright star Regulus.

Megacam imaging in two filters is important for separating the giant branches of additional NGC 3109 members from both foreground Galactic stars and background unresolved galaxies. Bellazzini et al. (2013, 2014) successfully demonstrated the ability to effectively remove contamination using colour information in an LBT study of Sextans A and B in g and r . Of the MegaCam filters, the r band is best-matched to the SED peak of red giants in an old stellar population. The imaging depth is set by the requirement to detect enough stars for a significant measurement of overdensity. With data reaching 3 magnitudes below the TRGB, McQuinn et al. (2013) found Leo P to have a *central* surface brightness of $\mu_V = 24.5$ mag arcsec² and only a few hundred RGB stars. We aim to reach a depth of two magnitudes below the TRGB ($M_r = -3.1$, or $r = 23$ at 1.7 Mpc), meaning $r = 25$; this is shallower than the Bellazzini et al. data, but their fainter objects were dominated by background galaxies. The $g - r$ colour found by Bellazzini et al. at $r = 25$ was $g - r \approx 1.0$ so the required g -band depth is $g = 26$.

We will search for new, faint members of the NGC 3109 association using the standard methods in the field: searching for spatial overdensities of resolved stars within magnitude and colour ranges expected for the stellar populations. The resolved stellar population studies of known NGC 3109 group members provide excellent templates for this work. Foreground and background (stellar and galaxy) populations are also well-characterized in these studies and others, so filtering out only the populations of interest is feasible.

To estimate exposure times, we assume less-than-perfect conditions (dark time, 1 arcsec seeing, airmass 1.2, 90% transparency) since our proposed observations overlap in RA with Large Programs MATLAS and LUAU and we have not tightly constrained the observing conditions. Assuming overheads for 4 dithered exposures per filter, reaching $r = 25$ and $g = 26$ at $S/N = 5$ requires 1.5 hours per field (0.5 in r and 1.0 in g .) (We note that in their successful Megacam detection of more than a dozen dwarf galaxies in the M81 group, Chiboucas et al. (2009) had somewhat better conditions than assumed here and reached $r = 25$ in approximately 1200 s exposures.) We therefore request a total of 18 hours of exposure time.