



## Maple Creek News

### Summer Star Party welcomed astronomers to the universe

by Tom Pierson, Maple Creek News (News)

-  [Front Page](#)
-  [News](#)
-  [Classifieds](#)
-  [Diversions](#)
-  [Contact](#)

Almost 200 stargazers ascended the Cypress Hills at The Meadows Campground for the 2002 Saskatchewan Summer Star Party August 9th to 11th. The Saskatoon and Regina Centres of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada (RASC) combine to host the yearly event.

Everybody had a really great time," said Star Party Chairperson Dr. Les Dickson of the Saskatoon Centre.

The SSSP held at Cypress Hills Park is usually a party for stars in the sky, as opposed to earthbound celebrities. The 2002 theme, "Discoveries are Made Here" was very appropriate. Vance Petriew of Regina is now a star of the earthly variety after discovering a comet at the star party in 2001.

Dr. Dickson said this about this year's party, "The most special thing was the dedication of the marker at the Meadows Campground entrance commemorating Vance Petriew's discovery there last year."

Alan Dyer, a writer and producer of science shows at the Calgary Science Centre whose articles and photographs regularly find their way into North America's two major astronomy magazines, was on hand for Petriew's discovery.

During this year's star party Dyer said, The fact that amateur astronomers can still find comets inspires other amateurs to try and do the same." In the modern, computerized age, there are many high powered robot telescopes and machines constantly monitoring the heavens. With Petriew's discovery Dyer says, Maybe the usefulness of amateurs is not yet over."

When Petriew brought his new Obsession telescope to the party last year, it was the most powerful of the party. This year about a half-dozen or more scopes of equal power were on the field.

Dr. Dickson rated the sky on Friday night to be 7 or 8 on a scale of 1-10. Saturday night, unfortunately, Mother Nature provided little more than sucker holes to peer through. Dickson said, Sunday night was probably the best of the three viewings," and added it rated an 8 or 9. The weather didn't always cooperate, but I think everyone got about 2 or 3 hours of viewing per night,"

When one thinks of stargazing and looking for planets in a telescope, one usually thinks of it as a night-time activity. Dyer knows otherwise. During the afternoon of August 9th, he enjoyed, and shared, a view of Venus.

If you know where to look, you can even see stars in the daytime says Dyer. On a nice day you can see the sun and moon, but you can find other stuff too." For daytime observing, a computerized finder is a helpful tool.

There are certain items which are standard equipment in star hunting. A viewing device can consist of the naked eye, binoculars or a telescope. The telescope can be home-made (there is always a wide variety of personally decorated ones on hand), or it can be store bought and straight from the box.

Maps and red flashlights are also standard

equipment to help find your way in the sky and the dark (interference on night vision by the colour red is minimal). More and more laptop computers are also popping up.

To ensure everyone's enjoyment, there are a list of rules published under the header, "Star Party Etiquette". No white flashlights are allowed and turning off all interior and trunk lights of vehicles are two of those rules.

The last rule on the list for proper etiquette may seem amusing to some, "Have fun & tell wild stories about things you observed that are far too dim to have possibly been seen."

Sandy Ferguson took visitors on a guided tour of the heavens with a Binocular Starwalk. One of the first things she said was, "Part of getting to learn the sky is getting out there."

Looking skyward is just the starting point. Ferguson said there is much in the way of mythology and religious beliefs surrounding constellations such as Cassiopeia and others.

Out of the darkness cries of, "I've got myself a fuzzy," can be heard. It is not what it sounds like. To borrow a phrase from Blair Colborne in describing a fuzzy, "It is just a cluster of stars, like a snowball, travelling through space."

Globular clusters, open clusters, galaxies, nebulas, planets, moons and orbiting satellites are some of the many heavenly, and heavily, hunted objects above earth's atmosphere at a star party. During daylight, seminars, discussions, an astrophotography contest, swap tables and much more are regular staples of its agenda.

A large contingent of amateur astronomers from Edmonton and another from Winnipeg were on hand to mingle with Saskatchewan stargazers. In fact, visitors came from throughout western Canada and the United States. One visitor, Dominique Devriendt

currently of Winnipeg, is originally from Belgium.

One of the guest speakers this year was John Leppert of Bismarck, North Dakota. An eclipse chaser, he brought images and tales of his quests that have taken him to Zambia, Germany and other locales around the globe.

Having the party run smoothly involves the efforts of many RASC members. But Dr. Dickson said, I really want to single out Brad Mason and his staff at the Cypress Hills Park who makes sure everything runs smoothly and we have everything we need.”

The 2003 SSSP is scheduled for August 23rd to August 25th. By coincidence, that is the time when the planet Mars will be at its closest to Earth for another 2000 years. As Dyer says about stargazing, There is never a dull moment. There is always neat stuff to see.”

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**[back to headlines](#)**

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**Front Page**  
**News**  
**Classifieds**  
**Diversions**  
  
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