

NORTH CENTRAL REGION ASTRONOMICAL LEAGUE REGION REPORT

July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025
Alan Sheidler, Regional Chair (2023-2027)



Region's Executive Officers:

Chair

Alan Sheidler (Popular Astronomy Club)
3528 56th Street Court
Moline, IL 61265
Mobile: (309) 236-0077
adsheidler@gmail.com
(second 2-year term expires May 2027)

Vice Chair

Eric Claeys (Naperville Astronomical Association)
1307 Champagne Court
Naperville, IL 60563
(630) 200-5890
AstroEric@eccssw.com
(first 2-year term expires May 2027)

Secretary/Treasurer

Roy Gustafson (Popular Astronomy Club)
11 Deer Run Road
Orion, Illinois 61273
Mobile: 309-781-4368
astroroy46@gmail.com
(third 2-year term expires May 2026)

Regional Representative

John Attewell (Rochester Astronomy Club)
3112 9th Avenue NW
Rochester, MN 55901
(507) 398-4492
john_attewell@hotmail.com
(second 3-year term expires May 2028)

Financial Report:

Initial Balances:	\$8,162.49 (July 1, 2024)
Final Balance:	\$8,012.67 (June 30, 2025)
Difference:	\$149.82 (decrease)

NCRAL Banking Account:

Location –

CBI Bank & Trust
3535 Avenue of the Cities
P.O. Box 1070
Moline, IL 61266-1070
Phone: 309-757-0700
www.senb.com

Signatories and contact information –

NCRAL Secretary-Treasurer Roy Gustafson
astroroy46@gmail.com
11 Deer Run Road
Orion, IL 61273
Mobile: 309-781-4368

AL Treasurer Michael Coucke
16901 SE Lee Blvd.
Lawton, OK 75501
[Contact the Treasurer](#)

Regional Awards & Mini-Grants:

- The *2025 NCRAL Region Award*, given in recognition of outstanding contributions to amateur astronomy, was presented to Bob King of the Arrowhead Astronomical Society and Minnesota Astronomical Society.
- The *2025 NCRAL Newsletter Editor Award* was presented to James VandeBerg of Des Moines Astronomical Society for editing *Starlight Journal*.
- Currently the Region offers two Mini-Grants: The Membership Recruitment Mini Grant and the Affiliate Recruitment Mini Grant. These grants are conferred annually and are worth up to \$250. This year there were no applicants for either grant and no awards were given.

Region Administrative Updates:

- **Eric Claeys** (Naperville Astronomical Association) was elected Vice Chair at NCRAL 2025 replacing William Davidson who had to step down due to term limits. Many thanks to Bill for his unwavering service as Vice Chair.
- **Alan Sheidler** (Popular Astronomy Club) and **John Attewell** (Rochester Astronomy Club) were re-elected to their positions of Chair and Regional Representative, respectively.
- **Josef Chlachula** (Rochester Astronomy Club) was appointed to serve as NCRAL webmaster replacing Jeff Setzer (Northern Cross Science Foundation) who decided to step down after having done a great job updating the Region's website. Many thanks to Jeff too.
- This year's regional conference was managed by a committee with members from Rochester Astronomy Club, Minnesota Astronomical Society, Cedar Amateur Astronomers, Milwaukee Astronomical Society, Naperville Astronomical Association and Popular Astronomy Club. Thanks to the skillful leadership of the conference co-chairs John Attewell and Randy Hemann (both from the Rochester Astronomy Club), the committee did a fantastic job bringing the conference to fruition. NCRAL 2025 was held April 25-26 at the Minneapolis Marriott Southwest, with activities concluding Sunday at the Bell Museum Planetarium. The conference began on the evening of April 25th with an open house and Star-B-Q at Eagle Lake Observatory, about 30 miles west of the convention center. Members of the Rochester Astronomy Club headed up the

food preparation for the Star-B-Q which was held at the Baylor Regional Park pavilion, a short walk from the Eagle Lake Observatory. After the Star-B-Q, the Minnesota Astronomical Society opened its classroom for presentations and their observatory for an excellent observing session. MAS members operated the observatory's impressive array of telescopes, and the weather cooperated too, providing excellent views of many astronomical objects. In addition, numerous personal scopes were set up in the nearby observing field, providing beautiful views for conference attendees underneath pristinely clear skies. It could not have been better!

- Cedar Amateur Astronomers, at the Eastern Iowa Observatory and Learning Center, near Cedar Rapids, Iowa has volunteered to be the host of the NCRAL 2026 convention. At the time of writing of this report, there are no hosts for 2027 or beyond.
- The Region welcomes two clubs to the AL: the Madison Astronomical Society (December 2024) and the Quad Cities Astronomical Society (June 2025). There are now 36 clubs and more than 2400 members.

Electronic Communications:

- The Region has completed the 9th consecutive year of publishing its quarterly newsletter, ***Northern Lights***. Back issues are accessible on the Region's website at <https://ncral.wordpress.com/newsletter-archive/>
- The Region has also completed the 2nd year of publishing the monthly ***NCRAL blotter***, providing timely communication with affiliates that cannot be accommodated by the quarterly newsletter. This is typically a 1-2 page bullet point list of time sensitive items that can be quickly and easily digested by members. See <https://ncral.wordpress.com/monthly-blotter/>
- NCRAL utilizes a [self-subscribed email list](#) for disseminating the ***Northern Lights*** newsletter and other communications. Some 525 of the Region's members are subscribed.
- The Region maintains an active Facebook page in which celestial events and accomplishments worthy of note are listed regularly. Currently there are more than 500 followers of the FB page. See <https://www.facebook.com/northcentralregionastronomicalleague/>
- The Region's website has a new webmaster: Josef Chlachula (Rochester Astronomy Club). The website is regularly updated with member society contact information and past issues of the ***Northern Lights*** and ***NCRAL blotter***. See www.ncral.wordpress.com
- By my estimate there are at least 18 club newsletters published in the region. Many of these newsletters are of very high quality and loaded with information about club activities and scientific content.
- The NCRAL Speakers Bureau currently has 30 individuals or groups willing to provide high-quality speakers for club meetings. See [SpeakersBureau](#)

NCRAL Club and Member Accomplishments:

- 8 members earned AL Outreach awards, two of which were at the Master level. Members earned 37 AL observing club pins and certificates during the year. These awards are recognized in the Region's newsletter.
- I am also happy to report that 71 NCRAL members have earned awards for the Region's seasonal Mini Messier Marathon. Each seasonal mini-marathon consists of approximately 27-28 of the 110 Messier objects and are grouped so that individuals can easily observe all of them within a couple hours in the early evening. The goal of the seasonal mini-marathons is to encourage folks to get out, learn the sky, and have fun.
- This Spring, five members earned NCRAL Messier Marathon Awards for observing 103 Messier objects in a single dusk-to-dawn night. This NCRAL observing program was approved at the NCRAL 2023 conference and is now available to members. The Region provides stars (pins) and certificates. A bronze star is awarded for observing 70 of the Messier objects, silver is awarded for viewing 103 using a goto scope and gold is awarded for viewing 103 unassisted. For details on the NCRAL Messier observing programs, see <https://ncral.wordpress.com/observing/>

- During last year's Alcon, the Twin City Amateur Astronomers was selected to receive one of the ten Horkheimer Library Telescopes. This telescope was donated to the Vespasian Warner Public Library in Clinton, IL.
- The International Library Telescope Taskforce reports the North Central Region now has 67 registered public library outlets. The library telescope program is a great way for clubs to expand their public outreach efforts and dovetail with the AL's goals.

Star Parties & Club Events:

- Post pandemic club events, meetings and star parties have returned to normal operations. Many club meetings now have incorporated the use of Zoom to enable a wider audience to attend as well as provide talks from guest speakers who might not otherwise be able to attend.
- A full slate of star parties and other astronomical events is now scheduled for 2025. See the NCRAL website's [Events in 2025](#) web page for details.

NCRAL Observations, Concerns, Objectives for 2025-2026:

- I am very impressed with the accomplishments of members and dynamism of clubs in the Region. There are now 36 member clubs and more than 2400 individual members within the Region. Since recovering from the pandemic, most clubs have returned to normal operation and in many ways are stronger now than ever before. Many have incorporated a virtual component to their meetings enabling greater accessibility by members and ability to provide speakers from anywhere in the world. While the Region continues to grow membership, there are still a number of clubs in the Region which are not members of NCRAL. In my first term as Chair, I have tried to persuade these clubs to join the AL or to understand why they are not already members. In my second term as Chair, I intend to continue visiting clubs (NCRAL and non-NCRAL clubs) around the region and to promote membership in the AL. Having status as a NCRAL club member provides a visible mark of credibility that should be desirable for any astronomy club.
- One concern I have is whether regional conferences will continue to be viable. It has been increasingly difficult to persuade clubs to serve as conference hosts. The NCRAL 2025 conference did not have a traditional host club but was managed by a conference committee. This conference was, in my view, very well managed and had excellent content. Although the conference was located in Minneapolis with a large metropolitan population base and home to the largest NCRAL club, the number of registered attendees was disappointing. The last time a regional conference was conducted in Minnesota was 2017 when Rochester Astronomy Club served as host. Since Minnesota has approximately 1/3 of the region's members, and since it had been so long since there was a conference in that state, we expected by having this year's conference there we would be able to attract high levels of attendance to the conference. However, despite a significant publicity campaign, total attendance at the conference was somewhat disappointing with only about 63 paying attendees. With only 2-3% of the membership attending, is it worth the effort to organize such an event for such a small group? When the books were closed on NCRAL 2025 we had a loss of \$87 on a total outlay of slightly more than \$11,000. Essentially, we nearly broke even, which was a good result, but disappointing given the hard work and significant challenges overcome by the conference committee. From a business perspective, what is the ROI (return on investment) for regional conferences? Should we continue doing conferences given the seeming lack of interest by 97% of the region's membership?
- Why is it so difficult to persuade clubs to serve as conference hosts? For small clubs, the amount of work involved in organizing a conference and the huge financial risk are certainly factors. This year's conference center required two down payments of more than \$3100 each to lock in the reservation. The Region made the first downpayment and Rochester Astronomy Club made the second one. Luckily, we were able to recover these amounts from the proceeds of the conference, but we all had "heartburn" over whether we would or not. While the Region has a policy to indemnify host clubs up to \$500 for losses associated with a conference, this amount seems to be inadequate given the inflationary environment we inhabit these days. If we want to continue to have traditional regional conferences, perhaps the Region should proactively kick in some working capital at the outset to allay the financial risk. In this way, we might be able to more easily

persuade smaller clubs to serve as hosts. To deal with work load requires manpower which can also be daunting for a small club. Clubs which have not done a conference may also lack the knowledge of what's involved. We have a NCRAL Convention Planning Guideline document: <https://ncral.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ncral-convention-planning-guidelines13.pdf> which does a great job of detailing the tasks of organizing a regional conference. While this is helpful, I think the Region can do more to assist in organizing. If club hosts could be identified two years in advance, members of those clubs could serve on other club's conference committees to gain experience and to help ease the work load. Likewise, experienced conference organizers could volunteer to help out if needed. And, of course planning a conference over a 2 year period of time would ease the logjam of work intensity as well.

- I think another potential problem with conferences might be a lack of support on the part of club leadership. I have observed that there are many astronomy related activities such as star parties, Astronomy Day, and club activities which inevitably conflict with the regional conference. This might particularly be the situation with larger clubs that have busy calendars and that have money making events which they already support. Club leaders will inevitably put emphasis on their own agenda rather than volunteer to host a regional conference which is unlikely to be profitable. Planning conferences to dovetail with other events such as star parties, could be helpful in this regard. Coordinating conferences with existing club events could also boost attendance. However, to do this requires early scheduling, planning and coordination—leadership.
- One impediment to the achieving higher attendance to the regional conferences is the cost of attendance and travel expenses. Registration costs of \$100 or more may not dissuade affluent professionals and retirees from attending a conference, but this would certainly shut out most students. For NCRAL 2026, I would like to try offering a significantly reduced fee for high school and college students to attend and see if we can encourage attendance of STEM students. Depending on the number of student attendees and the cost support provided (per student), we would probably need to use funds from the NCRAL treasury to support the attendance of those students. In my view, encouraging STEM students to attend supports the goals of the AL. I would like to receive suggestions for how we can improve this situation. How can we improve the financial risk and encourage the attendance particularly of students to the NCRAL conferences?

Respectfully submitted,

Alan Sheidler

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