

NORTH CENTRAL REGION ASTRONOMICAL LEAGUE REGION REPORT

July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026
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

Jim Dole (Planetary Studies Foundation)
Freeport, IL 61032
Mobile: (815)291-3072
jbdole@gmail.com

(Appointed by the Chair to replace Eric Claeys in Dec 2025, confirmed at NCRAL 2026 to serve until 2-year term expires May 2027)

Secretary/Treasurer

Carl Wenning (Twin City Amateur Astronomers)
21 Grandview Drive
Normal, IL 61761
Mobile: (309)830-4085
carlwenning@gmail.com

(Elected to replace Roy Gustafson at NCRAL 2026. 2-year term expires May 2028)

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:	\$7,987.12 (July 1, 2025)
Final Balance:	\$7,550.03 (June 30, 2026)
Difference:	\$437.09 (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 is in process of transfer to –

NCRAL Secretary-Treasurer Carl Wenning
carlwenning@gmail.com
21 Grandview Drive
Normal, IL 61761
Mobile: (309)830-4085

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

Regional Awards & Mini-Grants:

- The *2026 NCRAL Region Award*, given in recognition of outstanding contributions to amateur astronomy, was presented to two recipients: **Keith Short** of the Rockford Amateur Astronomers and **Steven Spangler** of the Cedar Amateur Astronomers. Both recipients have made significant contributions to their respective clubs and to the region and are fine examples of the best tradition of amateur astronomy.
- The *2026 NCRAL Newsletter Editor Award* was presented to **Jack Fitzmier** of the Madison Astronomical Society for editing *Capitol Skies*. Accompanying this award is a \$50 check to Jack's club.
- It was announced at the NCRAL 2026 Conference that **Greg Frohner** and **John Leeson**, co-editors of *The Prime Focus*, Cedar Amateur Astronomers' newsletter, will be the recipients of the AL's Mabel Sterns Newsletter Editor Award. This award will be given at Alcon 2026 in Cincinnati this August.
- 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 each worth up to \$250. This year there were no applicants for either grant and no awards were given.
- Two "special awards" were given by the Chair this year at NCRAL 2026 to acknowledge the long and unwavering contributions of **Roy Gustafson** and **Carl Wenning**. Roy is stepping down after serving 8 years as NCRAL Secretary-Treasurer and Carl is stepping down after 10 years as editor of the *Northern Lights* newsletter. The Chair is very grateful to these gentlemen for their support and guidance which go well above and beyond the responsibilities of their offices.

Region Administrative Updates:

- **Jim Dole** (Planetary Studies Foundation) was appointed by the Chair to serve out the remainder of the Vice Chair's position when **Eric Claeys** (Naperville Astronomical Association) decided to step down due to health issues. During the NCRAL business meeting at the NCRAL 2026 conference, the membership confirmed Jim's appointment and he will serve out the remainder of the Vice Chair term until May 2027. Many thanks to Eric for his service as Vice Chair and we wish him well.
- **Jim Dole** has also volunteered to plan upcoming virtual observing sessions for NCRAL members. Last year, on a trial basis, we provided live, virtual observing sessions via Zoom for anyone wishing to view the Titan

transits of Saturn, views of the Moon, and Comets Atlas and Lemmon. This is another way to highlight club observatories and foster camaraderie.

- **Carl Wenning** (Twin City Amateur Astronomers) was elected to the position of Secretary Treasurer to replace **Roy Gustafson** (Popular Astronomy Club). Roy is stepping down after 8 years in that position. Many thanks to Roy.
- **Paul Levesque** (Popular Astronomy Club) was appointed by the Chair to be editor of the NCRAL *Northern Lights* quarterly newsletter and monthly Blotter. Paul is taking over as editor of these valuable publications as Carl Wenning steps down as editor. Many thanks to Carl for his years of service.
- We recently learned that **Steven Peters** (Marquette Astronomical Society) who has served as regional historian is desiring to step down from this activity. The Chair is asking for volunteers to serve as historian(s) and pick up the slack left by Steven. Several individuals have expressed interest in helping with collecting and summarizing historical information. This may be of particular significance as NCRAL celebrates its 80th anniversary next year during NCRAL 2027. Depending on how this activity progresses, the Chair may appoint an individual(s) to serve as NCRAL historian. **Josef Chlachula**, the webmaster, has created and will continue to update the NCRAL website as historical documents become available.
- The NCRAL 2026 conference was hosted at the Eastern Iowa Cosmic Conference by the Cedar Amateur Astronomers in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Cosmic Conference occurred from May 15 through May 17. The Cosmic Conference was the result of 2 years of advance planning and 14 months of intensive effort by the CAA planning committee and work by CAA members. The results were more exciting than anticipated, providing opportunities not typical of NCRAL conferences. The weather cooperated for both Friday night's open house at the Eastern Iowa Observatory & Learning Center (EIOLC) and the Metro STEAM Academy's weather balloon launch from the roof of the Cedar Rapids Downtown Public Library on Saturday morning. The speakers were engaging, and the tours were excellent; the conference venue, DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Cedar Rapids Convention Complex, showcased the best that Cedar Rapids has to offer. The Eastern Iowa Cosmic Conference was uniquely organized in a two-track format to provide learning opportunities for learners of all ages and abilities. Track 1 was host to the NCRAL 2026 (annual) conference targeting attendees of the NCRAL business agenda, astronomy lectures, and awards banquet. Track 1 also included a Friday evening Star-B-Q at the Eastern Iowa Observatory and Learning Center followed by tours and observing session at certainly one of the finest observatory complexes in the NC region. The astro-photo contest was very popular with many entries, all of which were of outstanding quality. Many thanks to Chuck Allen for hosting and coordinating the astro-photo awards which were presented at the Saturday evening banquet. There were 118 individuals registered to attend Track 1 activities. Track 2 was targeted more for students and families with Free Public lectures and displays. The program agenda included Free public events including the launch of a weather balloon and talks by Harlow Shapley Visiting Lecturer Ryan French who spoke on Space Hazards, and NASA Engages Program speaker Dr. Dominic Benford who discussed Exoplanets. Track 2 attendees also were treated to several other speakers as well as vendor displays and sky shows in a portable, inflatable planetarium which was set up in the exhibition hall at the DoubleTree Convention Complex in downtown Cedar Rapids. Following the conference on Sunday, attendees were also able to participate in tours of the Collins Aerospace Museum, National Czech and Slovak Museum, NRAO VLBA Site and the Van Allen Space Physics Lab. There were approximately 200 total attendees to both tracks of the Cosmic Conference. A final tallying of expenses for the conference is still in process, but we expect there will be a profit. The estimated share of the profit to NCRAL is expected to be approximately \$1,500. The final results will be updated and reported at the AL business meeting in Cincinnati this August.
- **Milwaukee Astronomical Society, Waukesha, Wisconsin has volunteered to be the host of the NCRAL 2027 convention.** This will be a significant event where we will celebrate NCRAL's 80th birthday. At the time of writing of this report, there are no hosts for 2028 or beyond.
- The Region unfortunately is losing two clubs which are in the process of dissolving: Skokie Valley Astronomical Society and the Marquette Astronomical Society. With these losses, there are now 33 clubs and more than 2400 AL members.

Electronic Communications:

- The Region has completed the 10th consecutive year of publishing its quarterly newsletter, **Northern Lights**. **Paul Levesque** (Popular Astronomy Club) was appointed by the Chair to be editor of the NCRAL *Northern Lights* quarterly newsletter and monthly Blotter. Paul is taking over as editor of these valuable publications as Carl Wenning steps down as editor. Many thanks to Carl for his years of service. Back issues are accessible on the Region's website at <https://ncral.org/newsletter-archive/>
- The Region has also completed the 3rd year of publishing the monthly **NCRAL blotter**, providing timely communication with members 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.org/monthly-blotter/>
- The Region maintains an active Facebook page in which celestial events and accomplishments worthy of note are listed regularly. Currently there are more than 550 followers of the FB page. See <https://www.facebook.com/northcentralregionastronomicalleague/>
- The Region's webmaster, Josef Chlachula (Rochester Astronomy Club) has completely updated the website with member society contact information and past issues of the **Northern Lights** and **NCRAL blotter**. See www.ncral.org
- Josef Chlachula, your webmaster, has also created a **YouTube channel** with recordings of interviews, presentations, meetings and virtual observing sessions which have occurred within the Region. There are currently 20 programs to be found at this site: <https://www.youtube.com/@NCR-AL>
- Your webmaster is also expanding the region's historical records, which can be found here: <https://ncral.org/history/>
- We have created a complete list of club ALCors, Presidents and Members at Large. We use the club ALCors as primary contacts and presidents as secondary contacts for timely communication with the region and to distribute the *Northern Lights* and *Blotter*. This is in keeping with the way the AL was originally set up to facilitate communication with the membership. ALCors are urged to forward these communications as appropriate to their membership. Currently, there are approximately 90 individual email addresses in this list.
- 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 31 individuals or groups willing to provide high-quality speakers for club meetings. See [SpeakersBureau](#)

NCRAL Club and Member Accomplishments:

- 5 members earned AL Outreach awards, two of which were at the Master level. Members earned 72 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 70-103 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.org/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 Atlanta Public Library in Atlanta, Illinois.
- The International Library Telescope Taskforce reports the North Central Region now has 71 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.
- Carl Wenning of Twin City Amateur Astronomers piloted an after-school, elementary-level astronomy club, which he hopes will become a national model for such clubs. He has created a set of educational resources to help teachers host their own 10-week clubs.

Star Parties & Club Events:

- A full slate of star parties and other astronomical events is now scheduled for 2026. See the NCRAL website's [Events 2026 | NCRAL Online](#) 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. Even with the recent decommissioning of Skokie Valley and Marquette, there are still 33 member clubs and more than 2400 individual members within the Region. As the memory of the pandemic recedes, many 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 opportunities afforded by these technologies is enormous, it is still obviously difficult for many clubs to host virtual club meetings without technical difficulties. It is not unusual for virtual meetings to devote 10 minutes or more at the beginning of every meeting attempting to get the computer systems functioning properly. This problem is most acute with smaller clubs which lack facilities, AV equipment and tech-savvy members with experience conducting Zoom meetings.
- Since Josef Chlachula has taken over as NCRAL webmaster, he has hosted a number of virtual interviews and observing sessions for members around the region. For these virtual sessions we have used Zoom's free service which is time limited to 40 minutes. This has sufficed for many of these sessions, but does limit what can be accomplished in each session. I would like to propose NCRAL purchase a Zoom license to enable unlimited time for these meetings. Since the AL is a 501(c)3 entity, I believe this should enable the purchase of a reduced subscription fee. If this is acceptable to the AL leadership team, I would like to propose we obtain the **Zoom license and submit the cost to the AL treasurer for reimbursement**. Otherwise, does the AL already have a Zoom license NCRAL (the regions in general) could use?
- While the Region continues to grow membership, there are still a number of clubs in the Region which are not members of NCRAL. At the moment, only Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin have AL clubs. North Dakota, South Dakota and Upper Michigan do not have any AL-member clubs at this time. However, I am very impressed with the Black Hills Astronomical Society which I visited last year on the way back from Bryce Canyon. After meeting several BHAS members, touring their observatory outside of Rapid City, and virtually attending one of their club meetings I have come to realize this club is active and successful. A report on my visit can be found here (on page 15): <https://ncral.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/nl-10.2-autumn-2025.pdf> At my invitation, Ellen Madden, BHAS president, attended NCRAL 2026. Moreover, I am hopeful we can eventually get BHAS to join (rejoin) the AL at some point. Regardless, BHAS has a lot to offer and we should keep them engaged in what we are doing in the region and treat them as if they are an AL-member. That geographical part of NCRAL has a lot to offer in terms of dark skies and enthusiastic amateurs.
- One concern I continue to have is whether regional conferences are viable. This year's NCRAL 2026 conference was held as one part (Track 1) of the Eastern Iowa Cosmic Conference hosted by the Cedar Amateur Astronomers in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. This conference was by all accounts very successful. CAA did a fantastic job planning, implementing and conducting the conference. The preliminary planning occurred

nearly 2 years ahead of the conference and the heavy lifting of implementing occurred over the 14 months leading up to the conference. CAA's initiative to provide a public portion (Track 2) oriented to students, educators and families, was a great way to do public outreach and encourage young folks to get involved with the science and hobby of amateur astronomy. The CAA team led by Gordon Baustian and Chris Kardos did a great job on this conference. They also did a great job soliciting grants, donations and getting volunteers to devote time and energy to the conference. Informing and motivating schools and educators to bring students and attend the Track 2 program was a significant challenge. Reaching out and encouraging our schools to be involved in STEM seems more difficult than it should be. However, CAA rose to this challenge and provided a conference with content which rises to the level of an Alcon. However, it should be recognized that this level of effort cannot be expected from small clubs that lack observatories, conference facilities and professional-grade leadership manpower. The level of effort and the financial risk associated with hosting a conference is simply beyond what we should expect typically.

- To encourage clubs to volunteer to host conferences, NCRAL is encouraging planning committees to operate over a two year period. During the first year, members of the planning committee should work with the planning committee of the club hosting the current year's conference. In this way, clubs that have little or no experience can learn how to conduct a conference while helping the current group, as needed. 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. 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.
- I have attended MSRAL regional conferences and am always favorably impressed with them. At the risk of tooting my own horn too much, I would say the NCRAL conferences are also good. If the AL would like to encourage regional conferences, perhaps a **small advisory team** of NCRAL and MSRAL conference planning alumni could be assembled together with ALCON planners as well. This group could provide advice for future regional and ALCON conferences if desired.
- How can we improve the financial risk and encourage the attendance particularly of students to the NCRAL conferences? One suggestion I have is for the AL to provide grants to clubs that wish to host a regional conference. This would certainly be an enticement for clubs to take the plunge. The level of planning and work, the upfront costs to reserve facilities and the potential financial risks associated with hosting a regional conference is simply too much for most clubs to handle. If the AL wishes to support regional conferences, a **conference grant program** might be a great financial inducement for clubs to host.

Respectfully submitted,

Alan Sheidler

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