

NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTH CENTRAL REGION OF THE ASTRONOMICAL LEAGUE *VOLUME 11, NUMBER 2*

CHAIR'S MESSAGE: Fall Observations and a Rich History

As we enter into the fall season, this stands out as my favorite time of the year and brings some of the best opportunities for observing. Typically, the skies are clear or clearer, and the nights grow longer, providing more opportunities to view our favorite astronomical objects. Fall resonates because it is the time when farmers reap the harvest, the leaves change color, and we astronomers take advantage of viewing objects not well positioned in the sky at other times of the year.



Al Sheidler is shown with Stephen Peters in Marquette, Michigan, where Al received a treasure trove of items related to NCRAL's history.

Region History and Milestones

Since our last newsletter, several interesting developments have taken shape. This summer, my wife, Sara and I made a trip to Marquette, Michigan, to visit Stephen Peters. Stephen served for many years as our region's historian and is a member of the Marquette Astronomical Society. He did a fantastic job collecting and organizing historical information and documents about the North Central Region, dating all the way back to our founding in the mid-to-late 1940s.

Before we left Marquette, Stephen generously handed over his entire collection, thoughtfully organized in a very large banker's box. Looking through these files has been a joy, and they will serve us well as background information leading into next year's conference in Milwaukee.

A Major Milestone: Next year's conference, hosted by the Milwaukee Astronomical Society, will mark the 80th birthday of the North Central Region of the Astronomical League – a truly significant milestone!

We are currently scanning many of Stephen's collected documents. Carl Wenning has stepped in as

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Northern Lights is a free quarterly newsletter published by the North Central Region of the Astronomical League (NCRAL). It is intended to serve all members of NCRAL as well as the entire amateur astronomy community in the region.

Northern Lights serves as an open forum for NCRAL members and others with an interest in amateur astronomy. Opinions expressed in *Northern Lights* are not necessarily those of NCRAL, nor of any individual club officers or members, nor of any businesses or organizations supporting NCRAL.

Submissions to Northern Lights are welcome and can be sent via email to levesque5562@att.net. Photos which are submitted should be high resolution in .jpeg format when possible. Text submissions need not be formatted and should be sent as Word attachments when possible. Submissions may be edited for spelling, grammar, style, clarity and length.

Questions and comments should be sent to Paul Levesque, Northern Lights editor, at the email address above. Back issues of Northern Lights are available here: ncral.org/newsletter-archive.

NCRAL MISSION

The North Central Region of the Astronomical League (NCRAL) was established in 1947 and is an affiliate of the nationwide Astronomical League. NCRAL consists of amateur astronomy clubs and organizations in the upper Midwest, covering the states of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin, as well as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Members-at-large of the Astronomical League who live within this region are also included in NCRAL membership.

The primary goals of NCRAL are to promote amateur astronomy throughout the region and encourage fellowship among its members and affiliated clubs and organizations. Membership in NCRAL, and to its affiliates, is open to anyone with an interest in astronomy.

NCRAL is governed by an Executive Council consisting of three elected officials; current members of the Council are listed below. The NCRAL Executive Council acts in concert with the Representative to the Astronomical League Council, as well as the NCRAL Council, which consists of club and organization presidents and one representative of all AL-affiliated astronomy clubs in the region. NCRAL's bylaws can be found here: NCRALBylaws.

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NCRAL is a proud affiliate of the Astronomical League; learn more about the AL here: astroleague.org

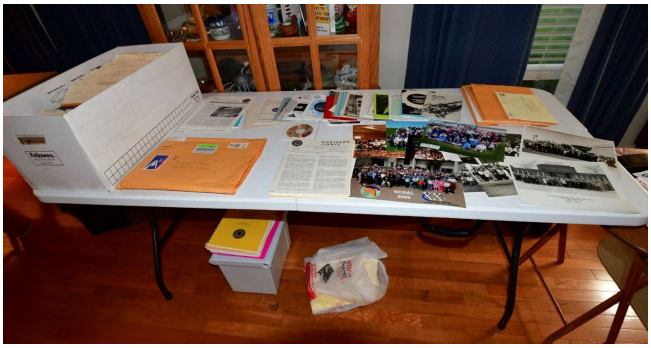
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CHAIR'S MESSAGE

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the region's new historian to survey the collection, and webmaster Joseph Chlachula is exploring ways to host historical documents (like older copies of the Northern Lights newsletter) on the NCRAL website. In the meantime, if you have an interest in a specific date range or event, feel free to reach out, and we can check Stephen's treasure trove for you.



Stephen Peters' collection of NCRAL photos and documents, some of which date back to the 1940s, is shown here.

NCRAL Resources and Updates

NCRAL Speakers Bureau: The bureau has been updated with a number of new speakers and programs that your club can tap into for talks on various topics. It is a fantastic way to spice up meetings with engaging science and astronomy content. Find out more at this link: NCRALSpeakersBureau.

Virtual Observing Sessions: I also invite you to watch the latest NCRAL virtual observing session covering last month's lunar eclipse; it's posted on YouTube, here: NCRALYouTubeChannel.

Keep looking up!

Alan Sheidler

NCRAL ASTRO BITS

SWAP 'N SELL: Plan now to be there for the Sheboygan Astronomical Society's 2027 "Swap 'N Sell," scheduled for Saturday, March 20, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The 20th annual event, held at the Aviation Heritage Center at Sheboygan Airport, will give amateur astronomers a chance to swap and/or sell their gear, and will also feature presentations by subject-matter experts and the famous brat fry.

BOOK BINGO: Everyone was a winner at "Book Bingo," a game held at this summer's Astronomy Camp at Long Lake Conservation Center in Palisade, Minnesota. Each camper received at least two, and as many as five, astronomy-related books written for a younger audience. Book Bingo was supported by the Minnesota Astronomical Society, which continues to seek donations of books on astronomy for readers between the ages of 11 and 15.

PLANETARIUM FUNDRAISER: The Horwitz-DeRemer Planetarium in Waukesha, Wisconsin, is conducting a fund-raising campaign titled "Don't Let the Planetarium Go Dark." The hardware, software and projectors currently used in the planetarium, which is owned and operated by the Waukesha School District, are reaching the end of their lives, and upgrades are needed to keep the system in operation. The campaign has a goal of raising $200,000 in order to enable the purchase and installation of cutting-edge projectors, upgraded computers, and advanced software. To learn more, go to this link: Horwitz-DeRemerPlanetarium.

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ALCON 2026

Astronomy Comes Together on the Cincinnati Riverfront

By Carl Wenning
Twin City Amateur Astronomers

For amateur astronomers, few events are as important as ALCON, the Astronomical League's annual convention. In 2026, the gathering came to the Cincinnati area, bringing together amateur astronomers, astrophotographers, educators, citizen scientists, telescope enthusiasts, and astronomy organizations for four days of lectures, exhibits, tours, fellowship, and celebration.



ALCON 2026 attendees gather for a group shot in the lobby of Cincinnati Marriott at RiverCenter.

Hosted by the Cincinnati Astronomical Society (CAS) in partnership with the Astronomical League, ALCON 2026 was held August 12–15 at the Cincinnati Marriott at RiverCenter in Covington, Kentucky, directly across the Ohio River from Cincinnati.

A Convention Built Around Community

The convention began with social activities and a welcome dinner, followed by a soft opening late Thursday morning (including a short talk by CAS Historian John Ventre) and the official opening that afternoon. Astronomical League President Chuck Allen and Cincinnati Astronomical Society President Bryan Simpson welcomed attendees before a series of presentations showcasing the extraordinary range of modern amateur astronomy.

The opening sessions were particularly well suited to a national amateur astronomy convention. David Knighton's presentation, "Urban Observing: Yes You Can!", addressed a problem familiar to countless observers: how to pursue astronomy when dark skies are increasingly hard to find. Dr. Nick Abel followed with "Teaching Scientific Ideas to Non-science People," an especially valuable topic for amateur astronomers who often serve as educators and public communicators. Dusty Segretto's presentation on micrometeorites added another dimension, demonstrating that amateur astronomy need not be limited to observing distant objects through a telescope.

Together, these presentations highlighted one of ALCON's greatest strengths: Astronomy is not a single activity. It encompasses observing, imaging, education, citizen science, instrumentation, research, history, and public outreach.

Citizen Science Takes Center Stage

One of the strongest themes of ALCON 2026 was the growing importance of citizen science. Friday's program featured a CAS Citizen Science presentation, the Astronomical League business meeting, and Dr. Wes Ryle's "Citizen Science Photometry." Saturday featured Jericho Kuehl's presentation on citizen

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ALCON 2026

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science. This focus is particularly significant for the future of amateur astronomy.

Modern technology has transformed what amateurs can accomplish. Affordable computerized telescopes, sensitive digital cameras, automated mounts, sophisticated software, and access to professional astronomical databases have dramatically narrowed the traditional gap between amateur and professional observing. ALCON 2026 recognized that reality, rather than treating amateur astronomy as merely a recreational pursuit.

Inspiring the Next Generation

Another particularly encouraging feature of the convention was its focus on young astronomers. Saturday's program included a panel titled "Engaging Young Scientists," followed by sessions honoring the winners of the National Young Astronomers Award. Elizabeth Zhang presented "Discovery of Hidden Circumbinary Planets through Eclipse Timing," while runner-up Michael Telesco presented work on "A Solar-System-like Planetary Architecture around a Sun-like Star." These presentations offered more than interesting science. They demonstrated what can happen when young people are given meaningful opportunities to participate in astronomy.

For an organization whose future depends on attracting and retaining new generations of observers, this may ultimately be one of the most important aspects of ALCON. Young people do not simply need to be told that astronomy is exciting. They need opportunities to do astronomy. ALCON's willingness to put young scientists on the same stage as established amateur and professional astronomers sends an important message: The next generation belongs here.

From Nebulae to Mars

The program's scientific scope was impressive. Scott Harrington's "Much Ado About Nebulae" offered a chance to revisit one of the great traditional subjects of amateur astronomy. The program then moved in the opposite direction, from visual observing to planetary science, with the keynote presentation by Dr. Rebecca Williams, a planetary geologist and Deputy

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One of the highlights of ALCON 2026 was the chance to visit the historic Cincinnati Observatory Center. For an astronomy convention, a visit to an observatory with such a distinguished history was especially fitting.

Unfortunately, the main observatory building, which houses the historic 16-inch Merz refractor, was unavailable for the tour because of ongoing construction. This was understandably disappointing, especially for those hoping to see one of the observatory's most famous instruments.

Fortunately, the adjacent O. M. Mitchel Observatory was open to convention visitors. Its classic 12-inch refractor provided an excellent alternative and gave participants the opportunity to experience another important part of Cincinnati's astronomical heritage.

The tour was made especially memorable by CAS Historian John Ventre, who provided background on the observatory and its history. He was assisted by two very knowledgeable docents and the observatory director, whose combined expertise added considerable depth to the experience. Their enthusiasm and knowledge brought the observatory's history and instruments to life

The visit to the site was both informative and enjoyable. It was a fitting reminder that astronomical observatories are not merely places where telescopes are housed; they are living links to the history of astronomy and to the generations of observers who came before us.

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ALCON 2026

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ALCON 2026 featured a visit to the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History and Science and gave attendees a chance to peer through the historic Merz and Mahler refractor.

Principal Investigator for the Mastcam and MARDI cameras aboard the Curiosity rover. Her talk, "Snapshots of Mars' Watery Past from NASA's Rovers," examined how Mars evolved from a world with abundant evidence of water to the cold, dry planet observed today.

The choice of Dr. Williams as the keynote speaker was particularly appropriate. Mars is one of the few planets that amateur astronomers can follow closely through both telescopic observation and the steady stream of images and discoveries returned by spacecraft.

The Vendor Hall and the Changing Amateur Telescope

No modern ALCON would be complete without its exhibitors, and ALCON 2026 continued that tradition. The vendor area, though considerably smaller than at Bryce Canyon last summer, offered a chance to examine equipment, talk with manufacturers and representatives, and keep up with the rapidly changing technology available to amateur astronomers.

A successful national convention has to serve two audiences simultaneously: The experienced observer seeking to extract the last ounce of performance from sophisticated equipment, and the newcomer who may still be learning to find the North Star. ALCON 2026's broad program appears to recognize that distinction.

Astronomy Beyond the Lecture Hall

One of the convention's most appealing features was its effort to get attendees out of the conference room. Thursday evening's StarBQ was held at the Cincinnati Museum Center, located in the magnificent, historic Union Terminal. The event combined food and fellowship with access to the Museum of Natural History and Science and the Neil Armstrong Space Exploration Gallery.

Friday offered several opportunities to explore Cincinnati, including a tour of the Cincinnati Observatory Center, an underground brewery tour, and activities led by CAS ambassadors. The Cincinnati Observatory tour was especially fitting for an astronomy convention; participants could even view the Sun through the historic Merz and Mahler refractor. These activities matter because conventions are remembered for more than lectures.

A Particularly Strong Regional Connection

The Cincinnati Astronomical Society deserves considerable credit for hosting the convention. The organization used the event not only to showcase Cincinnati, but also to demonstrate the strength of amateur astronomy in the region. The connection between CAS and the Moeller Observatory was high-

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ALCON 2026

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lighted in Saturday's program through a presentation titled "The Moeller Observatory and CAS Partnership: Bringing Professional-Level Astronomy Within Reach of Amateurs."

The convention's optional Sunday afterparty at the Moeller Observatory extended that idea. Attendees were invited to Adams County, Ohio, for an afternoon and evening at the research-class private observatory. Although not technically part of ALCON, the event offered an unusual opportunity for conference participants to experience a major amateur astronomical facility firsthand.

ALCON 2026 AWARD WINNERS

MABEL STERNS NEWSLETTER AWARD (First Place): John Leeson and Greg Frohner, The Prime Focus, Cedar Amateur Astronomers

HORKHEIMER/SMITH SERVICE AWARD (Second Place): Jericho Kuehl, Milwaukee Astronomical Society

HORKHEIMER/PARKER IMAGING AWARD (Third Place): Jericho Kuehl, Milwaukee Astronomical Society

HORKHEIMER/O'MEARA JOURNALISM AWARD: Second Place (tie): Gemma Bauer, Rochester Astronomy Club *(see page 14)*

LIBRARY TELESCOPE: River Bend Astronomy Club, Winner for Region

Overall Assessment

ALCON 2026 was more than a national meeting of the Astronomical League. It offered a snapshot of amateur astronomy at a pivotal moment in its history.

The program showcased how rapidly amateur capabilities are expanding, particularly in astrophotography, digital observing, citizen science, and collaboration with professional astronomers. At the same time, the convention upheld the traditions that have always made amateur astronomy special: Fellowship, observing, education, equipment, storytelling, and the simple pleasure of sharing the night sky with others.

The Cincinnati Astronomical Society and the Astronomical League deserve credit for organizing a convention that brought these elements together in an especially appealing setting. Perhaps the most encouraging lesson from ALCON 2026 is that amateur astronomy is not becoming less relevant in the age of professional space telescopes and robotic spacecraft. Quite the opposite.

With increasingly capable equipment, expanding citizen-science opportunities, stronger educational programs, and a new generation of young astronomers entering the field, amateurs have never had more opportunities to participate meaningfully in astronomy. ALCON 2026 celebrated that fact - and reminded attendees why they became amateur astronomers in the first place.

The Astronomical League has announced that the Yellowstone Valley Astronomy Association of Laurel, Montana, will serve as host of ALCON 2027. The convention is scheduled for July 28-31.

The main venue for ALCON 2027 will be the Billings Hotel and Convention Center, where visitors will find a casino, water slide pool, and ample banquet and presentation space. The agenda will include a dinner at historic Red Lodge; a "StarBQ" at Zoo Montana; and a stargazing session with Native American stories at Pictograph Cave State Park, located about five miles south of Billings. Observing under dark skies will be offered Thursday and Friday nights at Whistler Observatory in Red Lodge.

More information on ALCON 2027 will be posted by the Astronomical League as it becomes available.

Also note that NCRAL 2027, the annual convention of the North Central Region of the Astronomical League, will take place May 14-17 in Waukesha, Wisconsin. The convention will be hosted by the Milwaukee Astronomical Association. Look for more information in future issues of Northern Lights.

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Taking a solar eclipse cruise

Ship's balcony provides clear view of totality

By Paul Levesque
Secretary, Popular Astronomy Club

If you know my beautiful wife, Dawn, you probably know that she absolutely loves taking cruises.

I've lost count of the number of cruises we've taken together (sometimes accompanied by our kids and other family members) over the course of a marriage that began in 1988. It has to be about a dozen, maybe more, and that doesn't count a few cruises she took without me.

If you know me, you know that I have long been fascinated by total solar eclipses. When I became aware that a total eclipse was happening just south of the Quad Cities area (where I live, specifically in Moline, Illinois) on August 21, 2017, I become involved with both local astronomy groups (the Popular Astronomy Club and Quad Cities Astronomical Society) and begin planning to view this celestial wonder.



An enhanced photo of the eclipsed sun, as seen from the balcony of a cruise ship off the coast of Spain. Note the 'sunset' light to the left.

Along with several members of Dawn's family and my lifelong friend, Alvin Lavoie, we rented a house in Missouri to see the eclipse. It was an event that none of us would ever forget, and was even more spectacular than I had imagined.

Like many who've seen one total solar eclipse, I wanted very much to see another. And it turned out that there was another happening not far from the Quad Cities on April 8, 2024.

Unfortunately, that date conflicted with (you guessed it) a cruise we had already booked, this one taking us to Australia and New Zealand. This greatly disappointed me, although I'm well aware that this is a classic example of a first-world problem (and very grateful that we have the wherewithal to travel during our retirement years).

Soon after we returned from Australia, I did some research and learned that another total solar eclipse was coming on August 12, 2026, with a path of totality that would cross Greenland, clip the western edge of Iceland, and then proceed across the North Atlantic Ocean and Bay of Biscay before crossing Spain, ending in the Mediterranean Sea. Maybe we could go see that eclipse!

I fired up the Google machine and searched for eclipse tours in Spain. All were very expensive and required long stays. But then, there it was: An eclipse cruise, aboard the Princess line, that promised to place the ship at sea off the northern coast of Spain in the best possible viewing spot on the day of totality.



Shown on the balcony with eclipse glasses on are (from left) Paul and Dawn Levesque, and Debbie and Derek Wilson.

If you've ever dangled a piece of lunchmeat in front of a dog, you know how fast he'll snap it up. I figured I'd get the same reaction when I told

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ECLIPSE CRUISE

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Dawn about the eclipse cruise, and sure enough she snapped up the idea immediately.

We were still about two years out from the eclipse, but we figured that this cruise would fill up fast and that we'd better reserve our spot. We put out a call to family members and friends to see if anyone was interested in accompanying us. One couple (who'd seen the 2017 eclipse with us) did want to come: Derek and Debbie Wilson of Clinton, Iowa (Debbie is Dawn's sister).



Subject matter experts gave presentations on the Hubble Space Telescope and other topics related to astronomy during the cruise.

We and the Wilsons both booked the cruise and our flights, which took us to Heathrow Airport in London. The cruise, which would last for nearly two weeks, departed out of Southampton in England and began with a stop in Cherbourg, on Normandy in France. There, we toured some of the sites associated with the D-Day invasion.

The cruise also included stops at several ports in Spain, along with stops at the British territory of Gibraltar, athwart the mouth of the Mediterranean, and Lisbon, Portugal. Even if our view of the eclipse turned out to be somewhat disappointing, we knew that this would be a great vacation taking us to places we've never been before.

The cruise agenda included the usual music, comedy acts, trivia contests, karaoke, stage shows and other entertainment options. But it also included presentations by subject matter experts on a number of astronomy-related topics, including the science behind cruises, "killer" asteroids, observing with binoculars, and the Hubble Space Telescope.

I attended most of these presentations, which were clustered in the first four days of the cruise. August 12 was Day Five of the cruise, the day that everyone on board was looking forward to.

From conversation and observation, it appeared that most of my fellow passengers were Americans, and many had seen either one or both of the eclipses in 2017 and 2024.

There was some ambiguity about how the ship would be positioned and which side would be better for eclipse viewing. We knew that we preferred viewing the eclipse from our balcony, rather than with the crowd that would gather on deck. As luck would have it, our cabin was on the port side of the ship, and the Wilsons' cabin was on the starboard side. So, we knew we were covered either way.

Eclipse Day arrived, a day at sea, and we'd been told that port side, and thus our balcony, would be the viewing spot. It was cloudy that morning, with the Sun hidden behind a curtain of grey, but the good news was that there was plenty of time for the clouds to clear, as totality would not occur until about an hour before sunset.

The time of day of the eclipse meant that being at sea was an advantage, as there would be nothing in the way to obscure our view of the Sun, only the flat ocean surface. As the afternoon progressed, and the anticipation built, the clouds lifted and the sun began to shine brightly.

We later learned that the cloudy weather had persisted longer than originally forecast, but the captain expertly positioned the ship away from the clouds in a spot where the skies were crystal clear.

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ECLIPSE CRUISE

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The Wilsons came to our cabin, and we began to view the Sun through our certified eclipse glasses. Even though the Sun still cast plenty of light, looking at it through the glasses showed the slow progress of the Moon's shadow, creeping across the surface of the Sun as seen from our viewpoint in the ocean.

Ever so slowly, the light diminished, and the eclipse glasses showed the Sun almost fully obscured. And then, there it was: The diamond ring, followed by totality. You could see Venus pop suddenly into view somewhere above and to the left of the eclipsed sun, and you could see the weird twilight color cast on both sides where totality had just happened and where it was about to happen next.

We simply stared at the eclipsed Sun, with the corona and a few solar prominences surrounding what had become a black dot in the sky. As eclipses go, this was one of the shorter ones, with totality lasting about one and one-half minutes, but that seemed to be enough – anything more would perhaps be too overwhelming. It's easy to see why eclipses were terrifying for ancient people who didn't know they were coming.

The diamond ring appeared on the other side of the Sun, and totality ended. We could see the Sun slowly reappearing through the eclipse glasses, as the path of totality raced toward the mainland of Spain.



This map shows about where the cruise ship was positioned during totality. Photographers employed by the ship created the eclipse collage below.

There simply are no words that can adequately describe what we saw, nor the emotions we felt. It is something you need to experience for yourself before you really understand it.

On the scientific level, we do now understand how and why eclipses happen, and we have the technology to accurately predict the path of eclipses within inches and the time of eclipses within seconds. But we don't understand eclipses on what I'll dare to call the spiritual level.

Somehow, we are sentient beings living in what is, when measured in celestial units, a sliver of time when eclipses can happen on this tiny planet called Earth. The Moon is slowly moving away from Earth, and total eclipses will become impossible about 600 million years from now – a relatively short timeframe when compared to the age of the Universe.



Will there still be human beings on Earth then? Is the fact that we are privileged to view eclipses in this current cosmic era a happy coincidence, or something deeper – perhaps a signal from a higher power?

Science cannot answer those questions, nor can I, nor can anyone else. All of us, though, can behold the wonder that is a total solar eclipse, and be glad that we're here to see it.

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Preserving our astronomical heritage

The need for historical resources in the North Central Region

By Carl Wenning, NCRAL Historian

The history of amateur astronomy in the North Central Region of the Astronomical League is a remarkable story, one spanning decades and encompassing thousands of individuals, astronomy clubs, observing sessions, conventions, publications, awards, and shared experiences. Yet much of that history survives only in the memories of those who lived it, in boxes of club records, old newsletters and photographs, or in collections that may be difficult for future generations to locate. Once those resources disappear, important pieces of our collective history will be lost.

Fortunately, several NCRAL leaders and members have recognized the importance of preserving this heritage. Along with myself (the new NCRAL Historian), NCRAL Chair Alan Sheidler, Webmaster Josef Chlachula, and retiring Historian Stephen Peters, this team has been diligently working with historical materials from members and regional affiliates. Our work is an important star, but much more remains to be done.

What We Have Preserved So Far

The NCRAL historical collection already contains substantial information, such as:

- A listing of all NCRAL conventions and Chairs from 1947 to the present
- NCRAL convention photographs, although coverage is limited to certain years
- Recipients of NCRAL Regional Awards from 1989 to the present
- A miscellaneous collection of historical documents

In addition, several NCRAL-affiliated organizations have contributed histories of their own through an earlier project associated with ALCON 2012, hosted by the Chicago Astronomical Society. These include the Milwaukee Astronomical Society, Des Moines Astronomical Society, Planetary Studies Foundation, Iowa County Astronomers, Madison Astronomical Society, Naperville Astronomical Association, NEWSTAR, Northwest Suburban Astronomical Association, Peoria Astronomical Society, Popular Astronomy Club, Southeast Iowa Astronomy Club, Rockford Amateur Astronomers, Twin City Amateur Astronomers, Chicago Astronomical Society (which was started in the 1860s, long before NCRAL began), and the Bloomington Astronomical Society (no longer extant), with material dating from approximately 1893 to 1914. These histories demonstrate the richness of the Region's astronomical heritage.

Why These Resources Matter

Historical resources are more than old photographs, newsletters, and lists of names. They tell us who we were, how we got here, and why our organizations became what they are today.

An astronomy club might begin with a handful of people meeting in someone's home and, over time, establish an observing site, build an observatory, sponsor public programs, publish a newsletter, host a regional convention, or inspire generations of young people to pursue astronomy. These accomplishments are part of the history of amateur astronomy in the North Central Region.

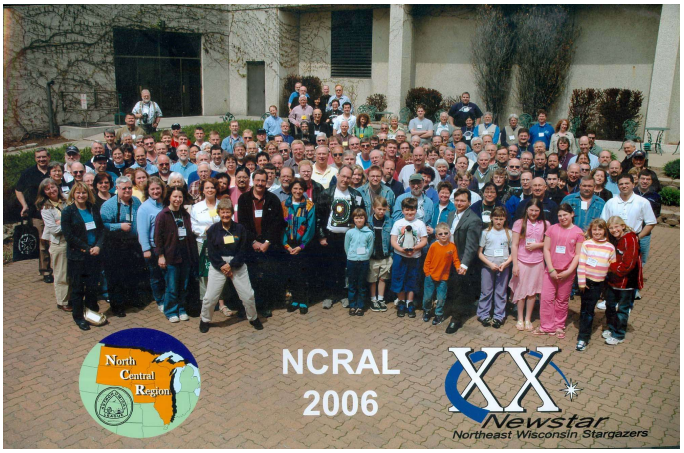
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PRESERVING HISTORY

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Historical resources also preserve the stories of the individuals behind those accomplishments. Many people whose names appear in old convention programs or club newsletters devoted decades to astronomy. Their contributions deserve to be remembered. They also illustrate how the hobby has evolved. Digital imaging, computerized telescopes, online resources, remote observing, and rising light pollution have transformed amateur astronomy. Yet the desire to explore the night sky, learn, observe, and share the experience remains unchanged.





Shown are two items that were recently added to the historical archive: A group photo and the program from NCRAL 2006.

The Risk of Losing Our History

Historical preservation is often considered only after a longtime member has passed away or a club's records have been discarded. By then, the person who knew the story may be gone. Photographs may survive, but no one knows who is pictured. Meeting minutes may remain, yet their context has been lost. Old newsletters may contain fascinating information, but no one may be left who remembers the events they describe. This is why now is the time to preserve NCRAL's history.

Every year, fewer people who lived through NCRAL's early decades remain to share their stories. Old club records can disappear when officers change, storage spaces are cleaned out, or longtime members downsize their collections. Preservation cannot wait until the information is lost.

What We Need

The NCRAL historical effort would greatly benefit from additional contributions from individuals and affiliate organizations. We need photographs, newsletters, convention programs, meeting minutes, correspondence, membership directories, award information, newspaper articles, observatory histories, club publications, personal recollections, and other documents that help tell the story of amateur astronomy in the region. Even seemingly insignificant material may prove valuable to a future historian.

An old convention badge may identify who attended an event. A photograph may identify an observatory that no longer exists. A club newsletter may document the construction of an observing facility. A personal scrapbook may contain information about an NCRAL event preserved nowhere else. Sometimes the most valuable historical resource is simply a person's memory.

Who founded your club? Where did members observe? When was your observatory built? Which members served NCRAL or the Astronomical League? What important events did your club host? What stories have been passed down from one generation to the next? These questions turn a collection of documents into a history.

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PRESERVING HISTORY

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Every Affiliate Has a Story Worth Preserving

The existing affiliate histories reflect the diversity of NCRAL's astronomical heritage. Some organizations have existed for generations, while others are newer. Some have operated observatories, while others have focused on public outreach, education, astrophotography, observing, or fellowship. Some have had hundreds of members, while others have been small groups whose impact on their communities has been significant.



This group photo was found in the files of the Madison Astronomical Society. The photo was taken during an Astronomical League convention in 1954.

A complete history of NCRAL should be more than a chronology of regional conventions and Chairs. It should also include the histories of the organizations and people who have shaped the Region. Imagine a future NCRAL member discovering not only when a convention was held but also what the host club was like, who organized it, what observers were interested in at the time, what equipment they used, and what participants experienced. That is the historical record we should strive to create.

A Call to Preserve and Share

The work already under way by the individuals cited above provides an important foundation. However, the historians cannot preserve NCRAL's history by themselves.

If you or your club have historical materials related to NCRAL or amateur astronomy in the North Central Region, consider sharing them with the NCRAL historical effort. Do not assume that anything is too old, too ordinary, or too insignificant to be useful.

If you have a box of photographs, old newsletters, convention programs, club records, or other memorabilia, let the NCRAL Historians know. If you are a longtime member, write down what you remember. If your club has never created a formal history, now is an excellent time to begin. If your organization already has a history, consider updating it and preserving the original documents and photographs.

The goal is not merely to create an archive of old material, but to ensure that future generations of amateur astronomers can discover and appreciate the people and organizations that came before them. Please preserve what you have and, if possible, share your most important records with the NCRAL Historian by emailing carlwenning@gmail.com.

Looking Toward the Future

The North Central Region has been part of the Astronomical League since 1947. Nearly eight decades have passed since NCRAL's early days. That is an extraordinary legacy.

But history does not preserve itself. Photographs fade. Paper deteriorates. Computers fail. Websites disappear. Members move away. Memories grow uncertain. What we preserve today becomes the history future NCRAL members will inherit. The current historical collection is an excellent start. The convention histories, Chair histories, award records, photographs, miscellaneous documents, and affiliate histories provide a valuable foundation.

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Asterisms Over Apps: An award-winning essay

Gemma Bauer, a 13-year-old homeschool student from Oronoco, Minnesota, was named as runner-up in the Astronomical League's 2026 Horkheimer / O'Meara Journalism Award. Gemma's submission, reprinted here, was an essay titled "Asterisms Over Apps." A youth member of the Rochester Astronomy Club, Gemma loves observing the night sky and is also an avid tennis player and guitarist.



Gemma Bauer is shown with the binoculars she uses for observing.

"Gemma, would you like to see the star that is named after you?" said my grandpa to me one night under the stars, "There it is, the brightest star at the bottom of this crown, the Corona Borealis!"

At the age of eight, I was so excited to learn there was a star with the same name that I had. Even though I learned later that my grandpa was teasing me, what a wonderful way to start my interest in the night sky!

Many people like my grandpa are amateur astronomers and enjoy observing the night sky. Not everyone, though, has the chance to learn about the sky in this way. Most school programs teach astronomy as an academic subject, but when you go outside under the stars, it is called observational astronomy.

Here is a question for you: If you went outside in the summer at midnight to look at the stars, would you see the same stars that you would see at midnight in the winter? The answer is "No!" This is due to the earth's orbit around the sun, because the "night side" of the earth faces in different directions at different times of the year. So, the night sky is always changing!

The key to learning the night sky is to learn the constellations. There are 88 constellations in the night sky, but in the Northern Hemisphere we only see about half of them. If you want to see the other constellations, you would have to travel to the Southern Hemisphere.

Many of these constellations are very old and date back to Babylonian times. Other cultures have had their own system of organizing the night sky. Chinese astronomers have been studying the night sky for longer than any other culture. They divide the sky into 31 regions: Three enclosures in the northern sky and 28 mansions that circle the celestial equator. The Polynesians organized the night sky into a star compass which they used for navigation on the Pacific Ocean.

Some cultures aligned important buildings or structures with significant astronomical events. For example, the Giza Pyramids in Egypt have precise alignments with Orion's belt. The Pyramid of Kukulkan in Mexico is aligned with the Sun so that, during a solar eclipse, it looks like a snake is sliding down the pyramid. All these examples reveal how important studying the sky was to our ancestors, and how we should carry on that tradition and teach the next generation.

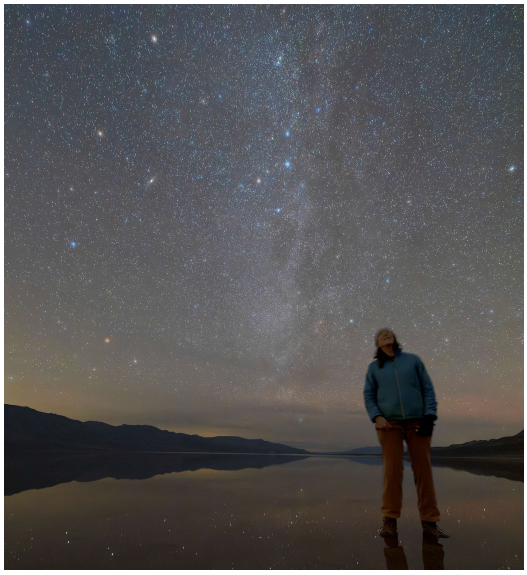
Today, many children in middle school waste time watching YouTube, TikTok and other social media. Kids are hooked on screens and need to be reintroduced to nature. What better way to do this than with astronomy, especially with going outside and observing the night sky.

Teaching the night sky can introduce children to a lifetime of learning and awaken a child's interest in something much better than scrolling a screen for hours. Who knows, they might even discover a star that has their own name!

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Do you know that NCRAL has a Speakers Bureau? Because we do! Speakers are available to give presentations on a number of different astronomy-related topics. These presentations can make your membership meetings more dynamic and interesting. You can find a list of available speakers via this link to Dropbox: NCRALSpeakersBureau. Also, if you have speakers and/or programs that you think could be shared with the rest of the region – or have questions about the Speakers Bureau – contact NCRAL Chair Alan Sheider at adsheidler@gmail.com.



Edith Auchter of Northwest Suburban Astronomers is shown in this photo taken earlier this year by her husband, Tom, at Death Valley National Park. Note the Milky Way behind her.

Astronomical League makes changes to observing programs

The Astronomical League Council recently approved some changes to AL's observing programs. These changes include:.

- Bambury: Designed for observers south of the Equator, this is now a complete program; it includes a pin for 100 observations, and a certificate for those who do all 600.
- For Your Eyes Only Observing Award: There is now a pin for this accomplishment.
- Herschel Society (silver and gold) Awards: There is now a pin for these accomplishments.
- Master Observer Triple Crown Award: There is now a pin for this accomplishment.
- Exoplanet Transit Observing Program: This is a newly adopted program, complete with pin and certificates.

In addition, the number of objects on the double star observing program has expanded. There are now 200 objects on the list, including some available to observers in the Southern Hemisphere.

You can learn more by going to the AL Observing Program Division webpage, here: ObservingPrograms.

The Astronomical League online store is open, and the RASC Observer's Handbook and Observer's Calendar for 2027 are now on sale.

The cost of the handbook is $29, and the cost of the calendar is $25. The price drops to $25 each for orders of six or more handbooks, and the cost of the calendar drops to $21 for orders of ten or more. Group orders also receive free shipping.

The handbook and calendar are published by the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, and ordering them through the Astronomical League saves paying import fees and shipping costs from Canada. Orders will be shipped to customers in December, in time for the holidays.

Quantities are limited, so you may want to order soon. You can place an order by visiting the AL's online store here: ALStore.

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CORRECTIONS TO LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS

The list of amateur astronomy organizations that are current members of the North Central Region of the Astronomical League published in the Summer 2026 issue of Northern Lights contained some errors and omissions. Below are corrections and additions. We regret any confusion these errors may have caused.

- The Southeastern Iowa Astronomy Club, which operates the Witte Observatory Complex at Big Hollow Recreation Area in Sperry, Iowa, was not listed. Here are links to the observatory's website (WitteObservatory) and Facebook page (Facebook/WitteObservatory)
- Though it still has a presence on Facebook, the Marquette (Michigan) Astronomical Society has dissolved.
- The email addresses for the presidents of the Des Moines Astronomical Society (JoAnn Cogil) and the Twin City Amateur Astronomers (Devanand Chatrathi) were inadvertently reversed.
- Jeff Menz (president@riverbendastro.org) is now president of the River Bend Astronomy Club, replacing Randy Harrison.
- The website listed for the Steele County Astronomical Society is defunct.
- While the link listed for the Northeast Wisconsin Stargazers (NEWSTAR) will take you to their website, here's a simpler address: new-star.org.
- While the links for the Neville Public Museum Astronomical Society and the Wehr Astronomical Society will take you to pages on the websites of their sponsoring organizations, their exclusive websites are as follows: wehrastro.wordpress.com / www. npmas.org/.
- The website listed for the Rockford Amateur Astronomers is defunct.





The Doug Firebaugh Observatory in Freeport, Illinois, was among the locations taking part in a NCRAL Zoom meeting held on the night of August 27-28, when a near-total lunar eclipse could be seen throughout the Midwest. The observatory was open to the public for the event and about 40 visitors attended. At right is a photo taken at the observatory near the peak of the eclipse. Other organizations throughout the North Central Region also hosted public nights during the eclipse and came away with their own beautiful photos.

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Milwaukee Astronomical Society supports Pandora mission

By Scott Lancelle

We did it! At a members night, after a presentation about eVscopes and citizen science, we took one of the MAS-owned Unistellar scopes out and collected data in support of NASA's Pandora Mission.

Pandora is a small satellite launched in January 2026 to study the atmospheres of at least 20 exoplanets and their host stars, using simultaneous visible-light photometry and near-infrared spectroscopy to separate planetary signals from stellar contamination. Amateur astronomers can download spectra and photometry readings into Pandora's publicly available database for educational or research purposes.

Our target, selected from the science catalog, was a star called "HD 73583," which has an exoplanet orbiting it. We downloaded the link from the catalog, and then selected "GOTO" the star. Then we took a ten-minute video. When it was done, we followed the prompts to take images with the dust cap on (i.e. dark frames). We then put the eVscope back in the cabinet and told it to upload the data.

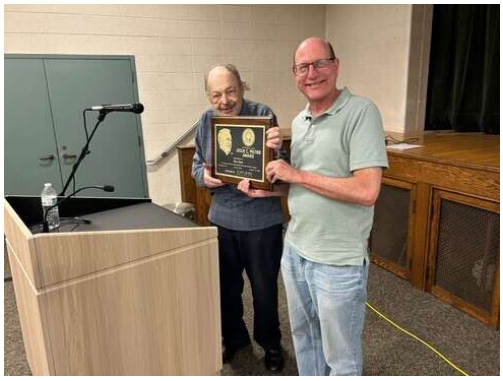
The next morning, we got the results. We contributed a magnitude reading to the database, which will help scientists understand the brightness of this star. This, in turn, will help them better interpret the light signatures from the planet passing in front of the star. Will light from this star show that there is water vapor around that planet?

It's just one of many readings, but maybe an important discovery will come of it, or maybe not. But isn't it amazing that anyone in the amateur astronomy community can be part of this?

You can do this too. What a cool time to be an amateur astronomer – and a member of the Milwaukee Astronomical Society!

PRESTIGIOUS AWARD PRESENTED

Ron Ziss (right) of the Naperville Astronomical Society is presented the Leslie C. Peltier Award by Roger Kolman, who is representing the Astronomical League. Ron was unable to attend ALCON 2026, where an awards ceremony was held. The Peltier Award recognizes amateur astronomers like Ron who contribute valuable results of lasting significance to the science of astronomy through sustained, meaningful observing.



TREASURER'S REPORT – JULY 1, 2026, THROUGH SEP 30, 2026

CARL J. WENNING, NCRAL SECRETARY-TREASURER

Check #	Date	Description	Amount	Deposit	Balance
	01-Jul-26	Balance brought forward			$7,550.03
	21-Jul-26	Profit sharing from NCRAL 2026		$1,761.00	$9,311.03
	30-Sep-26	Concluding balance			$9,311.03
				Net Change:	**$1,761.00**

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ASTRONOMICAL LEAGUE RECOGNITION

These NCRAL members completed various observing programs and received awards and certificates from the Astronomical League in recent months. The source is the most recent issue Reflector*, the AL's quarterly publication. North Central Region members continue to shine brightly! Congratulations to all and best luck to those members who continue to pursue recognition for their astronomical pursuits.*

ARP PECULIAR GALAXIES NORTHERN OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Tom Holman**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*

ASTERISM OBSERVING PROGRAM (BINOCULARS / EYES ONLY)
***Anthony J. Kroes**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*
***Danny Glover**, Madison Astronomical Society*

BEYOND POLARIS OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Katrina DeWitt**, Northeast Wisconsin Stargazers*

CALDWELL OBSERVING PROGRAM (GOLD)
***Gerald Jones**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*
***Antone G. Gregory**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*

CITIZEN SCIENCE SPECIAL PROGRAM
***Lisa Wentzel**, Twin City Amateur Astronomers*
Variable Stars Observation

EARTH ORBITING SATELLITE OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Anthony J. Kroes**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*

LUNAR EVOLUTION OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Anthony J. Kroes**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*
***David F. Berns**, Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society*



MASTER OBSERVER PROGRESSION
FOR YOUR EYES ONLY / MASTER IMAGER
BINOCULAR MASTER OBSERVER
***Anthony J. Kroes**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*

LUNAR OBSERVING PROGRAM
***John A. Peterson**, Chippewa Valley Astronomical Society*
***Joseph M. Peterson**, Chippewa Valley Astronomical Society*
***Anthony J. Kroes**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*
***Danny Glover**, Madison Astronomical Society*

LUNAR II OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Jack Fitzmeir**, Madison Astronomical Society*

SKY PUPPY OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Quincy Dettmers**, River Bend Astronomy Club*
***Zachary Hawthorne**, River Bend Astronomy Club*

SOLAR NEIGHBORHOOD OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Brian Chopp**, Neville Public Museum Astronomical Society*

SOUTHERN SKIES TELESCOPIC OBSERVING PROGRAM
***Gerald Jones**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*
***Antone G. Gregory**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*
***Clayton Lindsey**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*
***Greg Haubrich**, Minnesota Astronomical Society*

To learn more about the Astronomical League's observing programs and how you can participate, go to this link: AstroLeagueObservingPrograms

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