

THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

METEOR SECTION

PRELIMINARY NEWS-LETTER

1 August, 1966

I'd better start this news-letter off by apologizing to all active and potential meteor observers in general, and to Miss Isabel K. Williamson, the National Chairman of the Standing Committee on Observational Activities in particular, for the embarrassed silence of this Section since I was appointed Co-ordinator.

Meteor observing is a field in which amateurs without specialized equipment can make an important contribution - and enjoy themselves at the same time! The prime requirements are enthusiasm, familiarity with the constellations, and a willingness to stay up when the majority of citizens have hit the sack. All other things being equal, more meteors are seen between midnight and dawn than between dusk and midnight. After all, those arriving before midnight have to overtake the Earth from the rear, while those we see in the wee small hours are meeting us head-on. Thus the latter will tend to be brighter, and there will be more of them.

This is a field, also, in which the younger member can come into his (or her!) own. Here in Ottawa, we have two groups of experienced observers (Hillcrest and Queensway) made up of high school students. So, if you are thinking of starting or expanding a meteor observing group, don't neglect people of high school age as a source of recruits - after a short period of training, they can develop into very effective observers.

It is my intention to have the first few bulletins deal with such topics as setting up a visual observing station, the type of information to be gathered by visual observers, and the recovery of meteorites after a suspected fall. Later bulletins will deal with meteor photography and spectroscopy, telescopic meteors, and the collection of fireball reports from untrained observers. I would like to stress that these bulletins will be in the nature of advice from one amateur to another, and will not be laying down hard and fast rules. If you have any ideas of your own, go ahead and try them out, and please let me know the results. I would like to have your comments on the bulletins and news-letters (including this one!), and also news of your group or Centre's activities in the meteor observing field. (But not the data you've collected, please - send that to the Meteor Centre, National Research Council, Ottawa 2, Ontario, where Dr. Peter M. Millman will feed it to his hungry computers).

There have been a number of brilliant fireballs seen lately, and it is important to remember that most of the people from whom observations of this class of object can be collected do not know what it is they have seen. Reports of flying saucers, or unconfirmed stories of planes crashing in flames, unexplained noises from the sky, and other peculiar happenings, should be investigated - otherwise the chance of a meteorite recovery may be lost. Remember, reporters and others who work in the mass-communication field cannot be expected to be familiar with meteoritic phenomena. In this connection, it's instructive to read the reports of the meteorite which fell in Barwell, England, last Christmas Eve (see Sky and Telescope, July 1966, page 7, and Journal of the British Astronomical Association, April 1966, page 192), and compare it with the recoveries of the Bruderheim meteorite of 4 March 1960 and the Peace River meteorite of 31 March 1963 (see Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada: October 1961, page 218; and June 1964, page 109, respectively). I personally think the comparison reflects great credit on our Western meteorite recovery experts.

There are a growing number of books available (but probably not in your local library or bookstore, unfortunately!) which should be of use to amateur students of meteoritics. (Can anyone think of a less cumbersome handle to describe us? Please don't include such terms as "meteor nuts"!.) A good star atlas of naked-eye stars is essential - my first choice would be Norton's Star Atlas (Gall & Inglis, 21 shillings), with Ray Coutchie's Deep Sky Catalogue a close second (\$3.00 U.S., available from Ray Coutchie, 22018 Ybarra Road, Woodland Hills, California, U.S.A.). Fletcher G. Watson's Between the Planets (available as a paperback from Doubleday - Anchor Book N17 - \$1.25 U.S.) is also a near-essential. In a large group, somebody should make a point of getting Dr. D.W.R. McKinley's Meteor Science and Engineering (McGraw-Hill). There are plenty of others, of course - some day I hope to send out a fairly comprehensive list. And don't forget the magazines - "Sky and Telescope" and "The Review of Popular Astronomy".

Meteor showers for the late summer and early autumn include those old favourites, the Perseids (maximum 12 August, moon past third quarter), the Orionids (maximum 20 October, the first quarter moon should give no trouble), the long, slow Taurids (maximum around 5 November, they're active the better part of a month, and the moon may be bothersome up to a few days after the maximum), the the possibly spectacular Leonids (maximum around 14-18 November, the moon won't be a problem) - WATCH THIS ONE! There's even a possibility of picking up a few Giacobinids (9-10 October) although we can't expect a repeat of the great meteor storm of 1946.

One final word. The place to write to for fireball report forms, meteor plotting charts and record sheets (and to return said forms, charts and sheets to after they've been filled out) is the Meteor Centre, National Research Council, Ottawa 2, Ontario. But if you want to talk about your meteoritical exploits and adventures, or would like advice on getting started in this hobby of meteor observing, I'm your man. (Oh yes, and let me know the name of your Centre's meteor co-ordinator, please!)

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