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Blog

Pan-STARRS at Weko Beach

Posted by admin on March 14, 2013



Comet Pan-STARRS finally emerged from the twilight on March 13, 2013, and was witnessed through telescopes and cameras by about 50 people at Weko Beach in Bridgman, MI. The overcast sky started clearing late in the day, and by sunset the sky was clear, scopes were in place, and a crowd started gathering.

Story by Janet Hayes of the Herald Palladium is at <http://tinyurl.com/HP-comet>. Image by Bob Skorupa shows Comet Pan-STARRS, upper left, in the twilight sky competing with airplanes for attention (Nikon D7000 F/5.6 11.3sec ISO-640 105mm).

The night before, our planned AstroWatch was [scrapped](#) because of poor weather, but a change in cloud cover brought a change in mood as well. I set up three telescopes before sunset so we could check out solar features. A prominent string of sunspots stretched from side to side.

Spaceweather.com had reported that the active region AR1690 (around one of those sunspots) blasted out an explosion with a coronal mass ejection (CME) heading toward but just above the earth--a glancing blow.

Once the sun set at 7:50 p.m. EDT, we had to wait for darkness to descend before the comet would be discernible against the background sky. In the interim, people used their optics to scan the region halfway between the thin crescent moon and where the sun had set. Several individuals with cameras and tripods huddled in the lee of the main building at Weko Beach, for a cold, stiff wind was blowing off Lake Michigan. Thankfully, the park managers had shut off the lights they could control to aid our viewing.





Planes around Chicago produced several false alarms. Eventually I spotted a faint point of light with binoculars and then scanned with a telescope. As soon as the target swung through the field of view I knew it was Pan-STARRS with its tell-tale tail.

A polite crowd lined up to look--maybe that's why they call it civil twilight, which occurred at 8:18 p.m. EDT on the western edge of the time zone. The view improved as the twilight deepened, and we could readily notice the tail appearing longer as time progressed. While we never did see it with our naked eyes, people seemed satisfied with the telescopic sight. Once the comet descended into the haze line over northern Chicago, the tail shrank and the comet began its retreat from our view. Nautical twilight began at 8:50 p.m., but by then Pan-STARRS was gone.

I re-directed my telescopes to look at Jupiter, the Pleiades, and the gaunt crescent moon. I love those easy telescope targets, for they always deliver a rewarding view. People always enjoy seeing the four Galilean moons and the cloud belts on Jupiter, as do I.

In the ensuing days, Comet Pan-STARRS will continue to separate from the sun as it returns to deep regions of the solar system. In a Catch-22 scenario, the comet will be further from the sun, which is good for the sake of darker sky, but the comet will be further from the sun, which is bad for the sake of its tail-forming meltdown. By all means, though, keep looking on successive nights in the hope that you may yet see it as a naked eye celestial phenomenon.

Of course, during public observing events like this I get caught up in the flurry of telescope management and public outreach. I did not take notes on times of visibility or brightness estimates, etc., and I wish had taken more pictures. While I was doing my thing, Belinda Cheeseboro of Andrews University was building dry ice comets. I thank her and Kelly Youngberg and the team from the Andrews University Astronomy Club for being out there and setting up their AstroWatch event.



For more images of Comet Pan-STARRS, see the Realtime Image Gallery at <http://spaceweather.com/gallery/index.php?title=comet>.

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