

Preface

Astronomy has a recorded history longer than any other physical science. True, its juvenile years were spent as a co-joined twin of its more dubious sibling, astrology, and its musings were often not what we in this supposedly more enlightened epoch would term “scientific.” But we must always bear in mind that, for the ancients, astrological speculations were regarded with the same solemnity that we now reserve for the most profound of cosmological investigations.

Needless to say, such an ancient and venerable science has accrued around itself a rather mixed collection of interesting, sometimes puzzling, at times amusing, and on occasion downright bizarre accounts and anecdotes, ranging from interesting little tidbits of human interest to genuinely puzzling and anomalous observations. Lying beyond the mainstream of their topic, astronomical textbooks seldom mention these, but it is precisely such anecdotes and stories that make astronomy a living and human endeavor, as well as giving it a lighter side.

This “lighter side” – this fringe of anecdotes, oddities, factual trivia, and titillating tales – is what this book is all about. The title “Weird Astronomy” implies a wide range beyond the more or less staid mainstream of the topic. It is not necessarily “bad” astronomy. True, some examples of truly bad astronomy have been included here. But much “weird” astronomy is still “good” astronomy. It just does not fit well with what is official. A bright object near the Sun, a fast-moving blob of nebulosity in the night sky, a meteor that makes a “swishing” sound as it crosses the sky, lightning seen on the Moon or changing patterns on Mars, cell-like structures found in meteorites, or apparent signs of life on the Martian surface all make grist for the mill of this book.

Then there are the tales of difficult observations, naked-eye sightings of Jupiter’s brighter moons, a quasar spied through a small backyard telescope, even an observation of sunspots made

by peering up through the eye of a tropical storm. Such tales and much more await you in this book.

But we are not just collecting anecdotes here. There are activities for you, the reader, as well. Of course, we can't replicate lightning-like events on the Moon, nor is it likely that you will encounter repeat performances of most of the transitory events mentioned in these pages. And, of course, nobody observes the planet Vulcan these days!

Still, the way is open for you, the reader, to join in the fun and maybe even make some real contributions to science while so doing. Several "projects" have been included in these chapters which, it is hoped, will let you participate in at least some of the things about which you are reading. These projects are of varying degrees of complexity and will require different levels of experience. Those that require more experience or observing skills are marked with an asterisk (*). Some of these, if seriously and carefully pursued, may yield scientifically valuable data and, for these, basic directions are given for reporting your results to the interested parties.

In short then, if you are only interested in reading about the latest advances in planetary science, the most recent cosmological controversies, or the up-to-date count of extra-solar planets, you might want to stop right now.

But if the odd, the interesting, the peculiar, and – yes – the slightly weird attract you, and if you experience the thrill of a little practical observing as well ... read right on!

Weird Astronomy

Tales of Unusual, Bizarre, and Other Hard to Explain
Observations

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