



Preface

It is rather strange that Charles Messier's list of objects to avoid when hunting for comets became the first of many definitive lists of deep sky objects to view. He did, indeed, discover eleven comets, yet it is his "catalogue" that is his main claim to fame. Many would argue that the Messier Catalogue has little relevance today, with many amateur astronomers owning telescopes far larger than he had. Indeed, many advanced amateurs prefer to list objects from the New General Catalogue (NGC), which covers fainter objects and those not visible from Europe. I like the Messier Catalogue because I am familiar with many of its objects, some of which can be enjoyed with modest instruments from less than ideal viewing sites.

In fact, my inspiration for the book came from my own ideas for a comet hunt. One night, I was looking around the Lyra/Hercules/Draco region with binoculars, mostly to look at the area's many double stars. I came across a bright object that looked like a comet. Fortunately, I knew better than to go e-mailing the globe with claims of a new discovery. My "comet" was none other than the globular star cluster M92! I already knew of M92 but, as it was an exceptionally clear night and, as I'd never seen it so bright before, I didn't recognize it immediately. Cursing more that I didn't have any suitable imaging equipment, rather than it wasn't a new discovery, I took the opportunity to have a closer look with my 127 mm Maksutov-Cassegrain, known as a "Maksutov" for short.

This book is a personal voyage of discovery. Although many of the "Usual Suspects" (list of deep sky objects that are easily visible to binoculars) are in the Messier catalogue, some I had never seen before I started researching this book, or had seen a fuzzy patch in the place they were known to exist but not much else.

Indeed, there was a time when I even wondered if I would ever complete this book or find myself outside in the freezing winter trying to map the Virgo Galaxy Cluster before dawn, after two successive springs of missing it! Fortunately, the spring of 2009 was clear enough for me to see it. Not only was it necessary to

complete this book but was also a personal ambition of mine. My family thought I was mad, though, when I spent several nights awake until 3 a.m. in order to see the elusive members of the Messier Catalogue in southern Scorpius and Sagittarius. In fact, I'd already seen some of them from the southern hemisphere but, as I was trying to follow in the footsteps of Charles Messier himself, that would count as cheating! I finally completed observations of all objects in May 2010.

But first, a foreword by Kulvinder Singh Chadha on the man himself. Thanks also to him for researching Charles Messier's own observing notes.

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