

STAR PARTIES IN ARGENTINA

by Jan Keiski & Leo Cavagnaro

Banner shows new GAMA observing site north of Uspallata looking southeast towards Mendoza.

Two wonderful star parties!

THE LAST OFFICIAL GAMA STAR PARTY OF 2008 AT CANOTA SITE

On Saturday, December 20, 2008, GAMA, carried out the last observing night of the year in their nearby site in Canota. This is a place located about 25 miles north of Mendoza.

They go to this place once a month to observe the sky and carry out different observing projects. Each year, Leo sends GAMA members a proposed schedule including the observation dates for the entire observing year (February to December). They go to the mountains even during winter months in spite of low temperatures.

On this day it was a warm and we could enjoy a dark and clear sky with excellent weather.



Leo Cavagnaro, Jan Keiski, Carlos Gutierrez surrounded by members and friends of GAMA.

Carlos Calvo, a member of GAMA, carried his new Schmidt-Newtonian telescope and was working on the motorized system all night long. A brand new member attended the star party, so he was really amazed with the view, through the telescopes, of the bright gems in the southern skies, like the nebulae complexes in the Magellanic Clouds and the most beautiful globular cluster (in Leo's of course and my opinion now too) 47 Tucanae.

The zone of the nebula Eta Carina rises close to 11pm local time in December, reaching a good altitude in the sky near local midnight. Several observers aimed their telescopes to that zone to enjoy the rich field of the Milky Way. If you want so spend hours tracking marvelous deep-sky objects that are in that zone, just aim your telescope and begin to explore it. Not only is the Eta Carinae nebula a southern highlight, also some open clusters like the Southern Pleiades (IC 2602), the NGC 3532 and NGC 3293 clusters, all of them visible with the naked eye under a dark enough sky.

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On this day it was a warm and we could enjoy a dark and clear sky with excellent weather. Around 20 people went to Canota. Nicolás, a young amateur astronomer, brought his new 12-inch reflector for its “first light”.

On the other side of the observing site there were a few observers working with a 16-inch telescope and also their own instruments. Leo was observing interacting galaxies and identifying the members of the Robert's Quartet. He invited Carlos to observe and identify these faint and challenging galaxies and they were talking about these NGC galaxies for a long time that night.

Some GAMA members also showed him more constellations using laser pointers.



The last quarter Moon rose about 2:30am local time giving a nice show to the observers who were still at the observing site. The dark and steady sky and very good temperatures that night invited observers to stay here until very late.

Rising Moon. Photo taken from Canota by Jan Keiski

AN OBSERVING NIGHT AT PARAMILLOS

Paramillos is a site in the Andes Mountains located at an elevation of nearly 9,000 feet. You can reach this site from Mendoza City and also from Uspallata, a small village in the valley of the same name. It is a very good place to observe from. A faint

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The road as it passes by the Canota observing site. The Andes ahead and Paramillos observing site. Photo by Jan Keiski

glow from Mendoza City is visible from there, but it doesn't cause problems with the observation of deep-sky objects. A very small and faint glow from Santiago, Chile (the capital of Argentina's neighbor country to the west) is also visible behind the Andes. A very few lights from Uspallata Valley are visible far away to the northwest but they don't interfere either. It is definitely a very good site to carry out detailed observations.

A group of about 10 people went to this site Saturday, December 27, 2008. It was not an official activity of GAMA but an "Astronomical Expedition". It consisted members of Carlos Gutierrez's family, and friends of theirs. Also Elias of GAMA, myself and Leo and Carlos. Usually, we need about 2 hours to reach that place. This time Leo decided to go using the road from Mendoza through Canota and past Villavicencio. I really enjoyed the trip in spite of the road, which was very winding, and in a short time climbed very high in a few kilometers. The sheer drop-offs were very exciting, and scary!

We arrived to Paramillos about 10pm local time. In order to get a very dark sky we set up the telescopes and waited for the astronomical twilight which occurred at 10:30pm. As soon as the sky got dark enough I began to take a lot of photos of the southern sky. The northern constellations that are usually seen very high in the sky from your country are visible at low altitude toward North from here, so they are an interesting target for my digital camera. I took some photos of the constellations visible at this time, like Gemini, the twins (upper right in the picture below), and Auriga and the brightest star Capella (upper left in the picture).

Weather conditions were exciting with lightning visible to the east. It is very usual to have big storms in east Mendoza during the summer. It was a hot day (around 96F) in Mendoza. The temperature however at the observing site was very low, and it was also a windy night. The very cold wind caused some problems to all of us. I did not have problems because I remembered OSP last August that also experienced a very cold summer Saturday night. I had brought gloves, a hat and the Rose City Astronomers hooded sweatshirt, plus a blue winter jacket! Leo and the rest didn't have that much cold weather clothing along. It is very unusual to use them in December!!! I loaned Leo my gloves, and used my extra socks as mittens!

December is a good time of the year to observe galaxies from here. Also, it is a good month to observe the Messier objects situated in the northern constellations, the Open Clusters M36, M37 and M38 in Auriga, M34 in Perseus, the galaxy M33 in Triangulum and the open clusters M35 and NGC 2158 in Gemini, both visible in the same field of view.



Elias showing the sky with his telescope to some Gutierrez family friends. Photo by Jan Keiski