

Stargazing Peaks as Temperatures Slide

By Lesley Mahoney
NORWELL MARINER

With winter just around the corner, hats and mittens are resurrected from cedar closets, and the great indoors call a little more loudly each day. Soon, people will scurry inside, burying their faces in collars and scarves, barely casting an upward glance.

Ironically, as the thermometer registers lower and lower temperatures, the stargazing season is at its peak. According to Rolf Egon, the president of the South Shore Astronomical Society and an amateur astronomer, winter is usually the best time for sky-viewing.

"The air is colder and, as a rule, it's much more stable," he

said. "There's not as much movement of atoms and currents."

During the summer, on the other hand, the atoms are more turbulent as heat rises and falls. Since the air is not steady, Egon said, viewing can be affected as light images bend.

Last month at Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary in Marshfield, Egon led a group of about eight people on a telescopic tour of the sky for the Massachusetts Audubon Society's South Shore Sanctuaries — a program he will lead again Dec. 18. Through a telescope, the first-quarter moon took on new character, with its craters and mountains more visible.

"The moon was so close that it was almost blinding," partici-

pant Jean Stewart of Duxbury said.

But the ringed planet, Saturn, was one of the biggest draws — "a real crowd-pleaser," as Egon put it.

"It was almost like a cartoon," Stewart said. "It was so sharp and clear."

The group missed seeing Jupiter, which had set over the horizon before they arrived, but Stewart said she saw a meteorite shower. Along with the moon and Saturn, the group viewed the Andromeda galaxy and the constellations of Orion and Ursa Major, also known as "Big Bear."

Ellyn Einhorn, education coordinator for Mass. Audubon's South Shore Sanctuaries, was also part of the sky-watching group. Initially that evening, the constellation of Orion was not visible, she recalled. As the time passed, however, the stars of Orion's belt appeared as they came up over the horizon.

"By the time we left, we had seen the whole thing," she said.

"It's nice to see the progression of the night sky," Stewart said, noting that while she knows that stars move, it's not something she had ever witnessed before.

And while stargazing in cooler temperatures requires bundling up, Einhorn finds it preferable to watching the stars



in the summertime.

"I like the crisp, clear feeling of being out in the winter," she said. "Usually, in the summer, there are too many bugs.... It's hot and sweaty and itchy; it's hard to enjoy the stars."

At any time of year, outdoor stargazing is the only way to go, Egon said. Looking through a telescope indoors, through a pane of glass, will distort the light images.

But even outside, he said, one of the biggest problems is "light pollution." Street lights and house lights get in the way of sky-viewing. But Centennial Park in Norwell — where the South Shore Astronomical Society holds sky-viewing for its members and the public twice a month — and the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary offer good spots to look at the

night sky, he said.

ANYBODY THERE?

After studying the sky for more than four decades, Egon, 60, does not take it for granted.

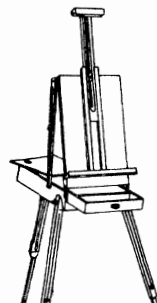
"It's a very humbling experience to see and appreciate the grandeur of the universe as we can see it, knowing there is much more beyond what we can see with even the world's largest telescope," said Egon, a Weymouth resident who studies astronomy as a hobby, or as what he refers to as "a sideline business." Having worked in technology communications at several Boston companies, he is now employed as a truck driver in Abington.

Egon's interest in astronomy was first sparked when he was in high school in the early 1950s. He was in a neighbor's backyard in Weymouth when he saw a

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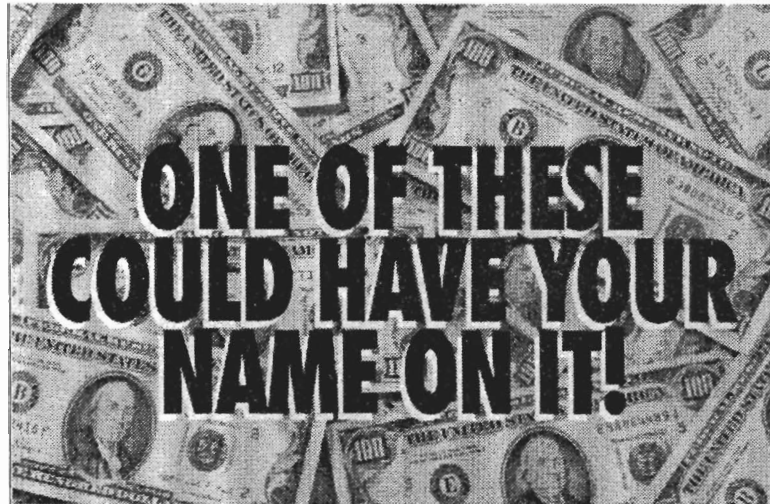


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moon, solid and bluish-green. Nine months after the sighting, Egon came across a book that documented a UFO sighting in Boston that had been tracked by the United States Air Force. Egon said the UFO was said to have passed over Weymouth and Braintree, and its description matched perfectly what he had seen.

Although that was his one and only UFO sighting, Egon said he believes there are other life forms out there. With billions and billions of other galaxies, he finds it hard to believe that Earth is the only planet that supports life.

Looking at the sky has inspired in him more than just an interest in the possibility of extraterrestrial life.

"It's also a very spiritual experience," Egon said. "It seems like there is a divine being — namely God — responsible for what we see."

The gulf between science and religion is often bridged, Egon said, citing as an example Albert Einstein, an agnostic, who eventually came to the conclusion that there was a supreme spirit.

The Star of Bethlehem, Egon said, is an example of something that is viewed as both a scientific and a religious phenomenon. He referred to educator and astrophysicist W. Russell Blake, who teaches at the Dr. W. Russell Blake Planetarium at Plymouth Community Intermediate School. Blake, he said, has expanded on the theo-

Stargazing Peaks

Continued from page 20

ry of astronomer Johannes Kepler, who theorized that the massing of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars represented what the biblical wise men took to be the Star of Bethlehem. According to Kepler, the planets aligned in the same spot and were almost superimposed on each other, emanating the bright light. Blake expanded that theory to include Venus and Mercury, which were apparent in the morning in the constellation of Virgo.

SPECTATORS' PLEASURE



Egon enjoys watching spectators' reactions to the wonders of the sky. Of course, he said, he can't see their faces because they are buried in the telescope. Instead, Egon gauges responses through what people say and body language.

"You can tell they're really impressed," he said.

In 1986, Egon watched for a reaction on

the face of a man who was seeing Halley's Comet for the second time in his life. The man, who was in his 80s at the time, had first seen the comet in 1910. Seventy-six years later, he was among 300 people at Marshfield Municipal Airport waiting for the chance to look through Egon's telescope. When the man turned away from the telescope, Egon said, "I swear his face was glowing."

Whether it's people lined up to see a comet or a small group eager for a glimpse at a planet or the craters of the moon, Egon said, he derives the essence of his enjoyment from "the wonderful reaction of the public."

(Editor's note: The South Shore Astronomical Society meets on the first Wednesday of each month, at 7 p.m., at the Council on Aging facility at 293 Pine St., Norwell, and is open to any family or individual who has any interest in astronomy. The 1997 season promises to be particularly interesting, with the arrival of the very bright comet Hale Bopp. The club holds viewing sessions twice each month, weather permitting. For information, call Louis A. Gentile, (617) 545-7067, or for a recorded message call (617) 447-2744.)

