

## Scope Out: A Celestial Encounter

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Many local professional and amateur astronomers, along with your everyday backyard stargazers, gathered on September 22 at the third annual “Scope Out” to indulge their passion for the skies.

“Scope Out”, an interactive telescope fair that offers plenty of fun and fascinating activities for the whole family, is held at the Cincinnati Observatory Center. The Center fosters a strong sense of history, both locally and nationally. Originally established in Mt. Adams (then known as Mt. Ida) in 1842 as the nation’s first professional observatory, it relocated to Mt. Lookout in 1873 to escape the smog of the city, and today remains at 3489 Observatory Place.

The Observatory has played an essential role in American astronomy. It has been deemed a National Historic Landmark, partly due to the groundbreaking scientific work that has been done there and also because of its classical architecture. The two buildings and the grounds are deeded to the University of Cincinnati, which operates the Center as a non-profit organization. The Observatory is supported by a wide network of volunteers, including astronomers, educators, preservationists, and local astronomy enthusiasts.

This year’s “Scope Out” afforded the public an opportunity to preview the exciting and often mystifying world of astronomy. Telescopes of all sizes and magnifications were set up in the grassy, park-like area outside of the buildings. Kids and adults took turns looking out at the sunspots. “This is *cool!*” cried 7-year-old Patrick of Hyde Park.

For Joe Raver of Covington, “Scope Out” is a much anticipated event. Each year, he sets up his huge Obsession telescope on the lawn, inviting others to look through it and offering his insights on astronomy. Joe has always been enthralled by all things celestial. “I often take my telescope on

camping trips out to the country—the things you can see are just amazing,” he says. A member of the Cincinnati Astronomical Society and FOTO (Friends of the Observatory), Joe teaches astronomy at the Art Academy in Mt. Adams.

Lines formed around the two enormous telescopes inside each of the buildings, where guided solar viewings took place throughout the day. Families strolled through the astrophotography exhibit in the Mitchell building.

In the basement of the main building, amateur astronomers Steve Schell and Jeff Green were busy making their own telescopes, an arduous process that involves carefully grinding mirrors on the tops of barrels. A group of 8-10 meets every Wednesday night to work on their current projects. “The bigger the mirror, the more you’ll be able to see,” explains Steve as he busily polishes. “To make one 6-inch telescope mirror takes around 40 hours.”

A large outdoor tent housed national and local vendors, exhibits, and refreshments. John Ventre, who teaches astronomy at the University of Cincinnati, manned the meteorite booth. He showed the crowd dozens of extraterrestrial shards that had fallen from space, including one piece of black metallic rock, recovered in Fairfield, that has been scientifically determined as a substance not originating on Earth.

There was no shortage of activities for the kids. On the rear lawn, children formed a human solar system, each representing a planet and linking together with a rope. “This helps them grasp the structure of the solar system in a way books just can’t do,” says a Hyde Park mom. On the upper level of the main building, kids enjoyed solar system puzzles, stick-on stars, and a children’s art exhibit.

Dozens of volunteers were on hand, ready and willing to impart their knowledge of all things heavenly. Jim Groen of Madisonville operated some solar scopes on the lawn, while his 15-year-old daughter Tiffany worked at a children’s booth in the main building. “My daughter got me interested in astronomy a few years ago,” Jim says. “She’s fascinated by it, and her excitement rubbed off on me. It’s a great hobby for a family to share.”

Free informative lectures were held throughout the day. Jon Jennings gave instructions on how to buy and use a telescope, Dean Regas discussed the mythology of the constellations, and Wayne Bresser talked about the early days on Venus, Earth, and Mars. Additional topics included planet formation, solar observations, and meteorites. At Toward duck, Dr. Michael Flick from Xavier University delivered the headline lecture during dinner: “Billions of Stars...But How Many Planets?”

Door and raffle prizes were awarded in the main tent. At 8 p.m., crowds gathered at the two historic indoor telescopes and the amateur telescopes on the lawn for nighttime stargazing.

Although it may be the headline event, “Scope Out” is just one of the many educational programs that take place at the Observatory throughout the year. Since its origin, the Observatory has held “Astronomy Nights” every Thursday and Friday, during which the public can tour the buildings, attend astronomy lectures, and gaze into space through the oldest operational telescope in the world (a Merz and Mahler, purchased in Germany in 1842). On clear nights, gazers can see planets, double stars, galaxies, planetary nebulae, comets and, of course, the moon.

And there’s more. The Observatory offers customized astronomy programs and classes for schools, scouts, and other community groups. The buildings and grounds can also be rented for day or evening group explorations and viewings. Guided historical tours are held on the second and fourth Sundays of each month. Also available are summer astronomy camps and amateur telescope-making sessions. In the winter, the Observatory hosts “Starlite, Starbrite,” an event featuring carriage rides, stargazing, and tours of holiday decorations. Astronomy presentations can also be booked for schools, workplaces, or clubs.

There are several levels of membership available at the Observatory. For more information, call 321-5186 or send an email to [observatory@fuse.net](mailto:observatory@fuse.net). Visit the Center online at [www.cincinnatiobservatory.org](http://www.cincinnatiobservatory.org).

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