

Prairie Astronomers keep their hobby simple

By Mark Lage
Senior Reporter

Prairie Astronomers, a Lincoln astronomy club, tries "to keep it simple," said Ron Debus, a member of the club and an auto painter at Meginnis Ford.

"When you go into great detail, or use big long words and explanations, you lose a lot of us," Debus said of the club.

So with its aim toward simple, straightforward astronomy, the Prairie Astronomers has been in existence since 1960, and now is about 70 members strong.

The group meets twice a month. The monthly meeting is the last Tuesday of every month at the Hyde Memorial Observatory at Holmes Park. One half-hour of each meeting is devoted to business, Debus said, and a program follows that generally lasts from a half-hour to an hour.

Slide shows, member presentations of special projects and guest lectures by University of Nebraska-Lincoln professors are included in the program, Debus said. Topics normally deal strictly with astronomy, but also can include rockets, space launches, and other aspects of the space program, such as the recent Voyager 2 encounter with Neptune, he said.

"We had a program on the Challenger disaster," Debus said, "which is not really astronomy, but it still applies to us."

Debus stressed that the group tries to keep the program less than an hour in length.

"We try to keep peoples' full attention," he said. "If you keep it

short and sweet, people don't get bored."

In addition to the club meeting, the group gathers on a moonless Friday night each month at an observation point 30 miles south of Lincoln, Debus said. The combination of moonless sky and distance from city lights greatly enhances the visibility of the night sky for observation.

Outside of club meetings,

'If you're really interested (in becoming an astronomer), then you'll want to either buy or build your own telescope. And by being in a club you learn so much more about what you want in a telescope, and you can save a lot of time and money.'

—Debus

members of the Prairie Astronomers do a great deal of volunteer work, Debus said.

"We do a lot of volunteer work at the Hyde Observatory, which is run strictly by volunteers," Debus said. The observatory is open to the public on Saturdays from sunset until 11 p.m.

Also, two or three group members occasionally will get together and prepare presentations for school groups or local scout groups, Debus said.

Debus himself has given school presentations on a 10-foot reflector telescope he built himself. He also has given programs on the building of it and then uses it to show groups of children and adults the

deep sky from Hyde Observatory.

Debus said his personal highlight as a member of the Prairie Astronomers was the recent period of time in which Halley's comet was visible.

"I spent more time at Hyde for Halley, observing and doing volunteer work, than for anything else," he said.

The group did not have an official meeting for the recent lunar

Debus said he knows of no such highlights coming up in the immediate future.

"There will be some eclipses coming up in 1991 and 1992, but I'm not sure if they will be visible here," he said.

For anyone interested in embarking on a "career" as an amateur astronomer, Debus has one simple piece of advice:

"Join your local astronomy club."


"If you're really interested, then you'll want to either buy or build your own telescope," he said. "And by being in a club you learn so much more about what you want in a telescope, and you can save a lot of time and money."

Anyone with an interest can join Prairie Astronomers, and to do so one simply needs to attend the monthly club meeting at Hyde, Debus said. The meeting is free, and interested but unsure people can attend several meetings without joining, he added.

"Out of all the people who end up joining, half join up right after their first meeting," Debus said. "The rest take a little longer."

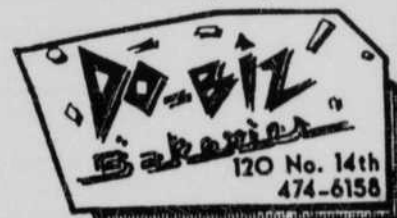
eclipse, but Debus said he and five others gathered at the observatory to watch it, and he was sure that nearly all of the other group members watched it at home.

"It was tremendous," he said.



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