

Stars over Sisters

By **Katlyn Linton**
Columnist

There is a group of extremely motivated high school students here in Sisters who work hard to learn skills that may eventually help lead to new discoveries in space.

The student branch of the Sisters Astronomy Club (SAC) consists of about 16 students who all share a love for the night sky and a desire to learn more about it.

They meet every Wednesday during lunch to talk about current and upcoming astronomy-related events, such as participation in star parties, science fairs and other science projects. These include helping to plan and conduct up to six public star-watches during the spring, summer and early fall, held at Sisters Park & Recreation District.

They are often called upon to prepare and deliver PowerPoint presentations to the visiting audience. After the show, one may operate one of the school's telescopes, alongside other members of SAC who have also brought their telescopes, to show visitors prominent objects in the night sky.

But the most challenging project is involvement in a citizen science program called RECON, which stands for Research and Education Collaborative Occultation Network. It is made up of over 54 telescope sites run by more than 60 communities extending from Oroville, Washington along the spine of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada mountain ranges, all the way down to Yuma, Arizona. The Sisters RECON team consists of students in the club, educator Rima Givot, and various adult members of SAC.

RECON is a project, piloted from 2012-14, designed to study Trans-Neptunian Objects (TNOs) which orbit the sun beyond the planet Neptune. Many of these bodies lie within the Kuiper Belt, such as Pluto, discovered by Clyde Tombaugh in 1930, and Eris. Determining the sizes of these objects will help us to understand their composition and formation, which could also tell us a lot of information about the origins of our solar system.

RECON employs the method of stellar occultation in an attempt to measure the size of a TNO. An occultation is an event that occurs when one object is hidden by another object that passes between it and the observer. So when a TNO passes in front of a distant star, the star dims or disappears for a short period of

time that is proportional to the size of the TNO. Each community in the network locates the proper star field in the sky, then records the event with a telescope and video camera provided by RECON. The collected data is then uploaded to the masterminds behind this project, Marc Buie and John Keller and others, for analysis.

Periodically, Buie and Keller will arrange a network-wide conference inviting each of the communities to attend. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss what is and isn't going well and generally share experiences. This year the conference was held at the Sunriver Resort in Sunriver, Oregon on October 27-29. There were a total of 14 high school students there, 10 of them being Sisters Astronomy Club members: Katlyn Linton, Rylee Funk, Amy Hills, Holland Hartman, Julia

Collins-Burke, Sofia Frack, Delsie McCrystal, Grace Maiden, Nancy Montecinos and Ramsey Schar. Teacher Rima Givot and SAC members Jim Hammond and Ron Thorkildson also helped represent the Sisters team.

They spent a great deal of time getting to know the other communities who were in attendance. There were probably 80 people present who are involved in this project. Each community had an opportunity to speak about problems it was having with any of the equipment.

Sisters High School Astronomy Club put together a presentation explaining challenges and triumphs regarding past RECON events, as well as sharing ideas on how to improve student involvement going forward.

It wasn't all just presentations though. The exciting



PHOTO PROVIDED

The Sisters RECON team recorded this image of the moon at Sunriver with its telescope and camera.

part was the club's time at the Oregon Observatory. For two nights members learned better techniques to locate and record the proper star field. Overall, it was a great meeting with like-minded people from all walks of life. And the food was great, too!

The future of our SAC is unknown but it hopes to continue to grow and gain important members from the high

school who share that love for the night sky. The club also wants to involve the community as much as possible in its project. The monthly star parties and every RECON event are open to anyone and everyone to come down to the high school and look at the stars.

To find out more about RECON and the project visit: <http://tnorecon.net/about-us/about-the-project>.

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