

A Walk on the Wild Side

by Chris Floyd

The moon is due to rise well after midnight tonight and the weather map shows clear skies expected. I arrive at my country deep sky observing site just on dusk and in anticipation of uninterrupted viewing through transparent atmosphere. I hurriedly assemble the new equipment that will channel photons of light from distant clusters, glowing gas and whole island galaxies. Within only 3 minutes of arriving, the equipment is fully set up and waiting for me to sit on board to take off for the visual galactic ride of my lifetime.

I quickly check that everything is functioning and all seems okay; all connections and drives are secure and working on cue. I look up to the darkening sky and accept the sky is still twilight, and I must wait at least another 15 minutes before takeoff. I use the spare time to set up my portable 10-inch f/4.5 Newtonian telescope.

By now the sky is dark and transparent, and with unaided eye I quickly do a limiting magnitude count. My AAVSO tables show the site transparency to be around magnitude 6.4. Quite respectable. A quick charge of sweet coffee and then I climb into the new observational apparatus. I don't expect to return to ground zero for at least an hour.

A gentle nudge of the joystick control and altitude movement brings into view dozens of coloured stars, bright enough to fine tune the stereoscopic focus. Careful focusing is critical at this point, so the optic-brain-nervous system is completely relaxed and comfortable. Because the feast of visual objects anticipated is so rich, I spend a few moments re-checking stereoscopic focus so I don't interrupt the voyage with eyestrain due to sloppy focusing.

The voyage begins. Fast speeds on the joystick control sweeps my real-time views diagonally upwards towards Canis Major and through the rich Orion arm of the Milky Way. On this first sweep, literally thousands of sparkling stars and clusters race through the field of view. Suddenly something extraordinary grabs my attention and the rapid sweep comes to a sudden stop as I let go of the joystick control. A small flick of a switch with my thumb puts the motion into very low speed, and again by simply nudging the joystick, the celestial object is soon centred into the field of view. The view is of a sparkling open cluster containing well over 30 stars, with an obvious yellow-orange star on the western edge. A quick press of a button and the computer LED identifies it as NGC 2422.

The surrounding area is so rich I decide to sweep around in a slowly widening circular movement. In that simple 2 minute sweep, I count over a dozen clusters all within a 3° radius. I'd like to voyage slowly all over the Canis Major and Puppis area but because the sky transparency is so impressive I favour viewing the spectacular dark-bright contrast complex nebulosity in the rich Carina-Crux area, some 100° away.

I flick the switch to engage fast speed and then simply lean on the mini joystick control which immediately traverses the views towards the south-east. Hundreds of thousands of sparkling stars rapidly zip across the field of view as I cruise rapidly and comfortably toward Carina.

Within only seconds the views become noticeably rich as the starship port-hole-type views bring to my eyes the Carina arm of our galaxy. Once the general area is reached, I again simply flick the micro switch to engage slow speeds and glorious controlled panning is affected. The view is breathtaking—swirling extended loops of nebulosity surround the brilliant orange super nova candidate, Eta Carina. Dark inky blobs of absorption nebulae appear as infinite deep back lakes overlaying background glowing gas. Nearby, the brilliant Jewel Box rival OC 3293 is immersed in a soft glowing reflection nebula.

I cruise higher, sweeping through the rich Vela area, and before long I'm peering directly towards the zenith with no physical discomfort, back strain or sore neck. Here, directly overhead, the sky transparency is optimum and I get the real feeling of seeing out to forever.

That one continuous sky tour ultimately lasted 2 hours and I visually ventured to all corners of the celestial sphere. I directly observed more than a thousand deep sky objects and felt comfortably content and convinced I knew the night sky that much better.

The "tour" was made possible by the advent of the new "Star Chair 2000", a portable, fully reclining motorised electronic binocular chair. The optics used were a new pair of Celestron 15×80 mm binoculars. I've been observing and photographing the night sky for 35 years with telescopes of all sizes but tonight the nearby 10-inch reflector lay dormant. This comfortable and controlled method is not a substitute for conventional telescope eye-balling, but could well become a revolution that coerces many retired observers of all ages, to re-explore the night skies and tour the universe in a sensible comfortable manner.

