



# AU AstroNews

## The Newsletter of the Astronomical Unit

January 2024

Sponsored by the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History



*Bruce Murdock sets up for the public at Ritz-Carlton Bacara Resort. Photo credit: Tom Totton*

### **Happy New Year!**

Best wishes to all!

### **SBAU Election Results**

After another fiercely contested election, Jerry Wilson remains President, Ron Herron remains Vice President, Pat McPartlin is our new Treasurer, and Andy Allen is our new Secretary. Victims of appointed positions remain the same, and Diane Welcenbach took on the new appointed position of Events Coordinator.

### **The Moon Occults Antares**

The waning crescent Moon will pass in front of the red supergiant star Antares, the heart of Scorpius, in the predawn sky of Monday, January 8. Antares will vanish behind the bright limb of the Moon

around 05:39 AM PST, and emerge from the dark limb at about 06:27 AM. Venus will shine brightly to their upper left.

*SBAU volunteers must have undergone the SBMNH background check, and conform with the SBMNH policies for dealing with the public, to participate in outreach activities. To get vetted, contact SBMNH Volunteer Manager Rebecca Coulter <[rcoulter@sbnature2.org](mailto:rcoulter@sbnature2.org)>. It's quick and painless.*

### **Outreach Events**

#### **Tuesday, January 2, 5 PM**

Earth is at perihelion, closest to the Sun for the year.

#### **Friday, January 5, 7 PM**

Quick planetarium show, then at 7:30, our monthly meeting in Farrand Auditorium at SBMNH. This will be a hybrid meeting, also on Zoom. Watch your email or find the link on the SBAU web page. Our speaker will be on Zoom, and the subject will be the Centennial of the annual Stellafane gathering of the Springfield Telescope Makers.

#### **Tuesday, January 9, setup 7 PM \*\*\* Note change to second Tuesdays for 2024 \*\*\***

Telescope Tuesday at Camino Real Marketplace, in the plaza by the theater.

#### **Saturday, January 13, 5 PM**

AU monthly planning meeting on Zoom. Watch your email for the link.

#### **Saturday, January 13, setup 6 PM**

Monthly Public Star Party at SBMNH, at Palmer Observatory from 7 to 10 PM.

## **Tuesday, January 16, setup 4 PM**

Potluck dinner for volunteers. Science Night at Mountain View School, 5465 Queen Ann Lane. We set up on the blacktop area of the playground, entering through a gate on the N side of campus.

## **Thursday, January 18, setup 4 PM**

Night Under The Stars (NUTS) at Santa Ynez Elementary, 3525 Pine Street in Santa Ynez. This is the campus at the west side of the parcel, with Santa Ynez Charter School to the east.

## **Friday, January 19, setup 6 PM**

Monthly Public Telescope Night at Westmont, at their Keck Observatory, next to the athletic fields.

## **FROM THE PRESIDENT**

*Jerry Wilson*

### The Star of Bethlehem

What exactly the star of Bethlehem is has been an unanswered question for a number of centuries. There is no actual evidence or witness accounts in recorded history and no reference to it at all in the Bible, but many have speculated. One article I read said it boiled down to two possibilities, a supernova in the night sky or a comet. I would add a third option based on arguments published in a book called, of all things, "The Star of Bethlehem." It was written by Michael R. Molnar, a professor of astronomy at Rutgers University.

Professor Molnar was also a coin collector and acquired coins that were contemporary to the transition from BCE to CE that showed the face of contemporary rulers and a star. This started him on a quest through artifacts, records and scripture.

First we need to keep in mind that the population 2,000 years ago did not view the heavens the same way we do. They did not know the nature of planets or stars through science. They tended to view the heavens through horoscopes.

When the Three Magi showed up in the Holy Land they claimed they were following a star that guided

them from the east. The sky was readily available to everyone in the holy land, as there were no city lights to blot out the sky. So the Magi claiming they followed a star portending the birth of a King did not resonate with sky watchers of the time. The "star" was likely a conjunction of planets in Zodiac Houses that to astrologers portended the birth of a King.

The most likely time for the event that was claimed to portend the birth of a King of Kings is April 17, 6 BCE, and the event was a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter ascending in Aries in the dawn sky with the moon attending.

## **ARTS CORNER**

At the top of California

A lonely old man  
Played a silver flute  
Its sad haunting notes  
Drifted across a mile-long crystal lake

I talked to Sequoia Redwoods  
Whose crimson scars  
Told me of a hundred years past  
When they were blazed by the first men

I talked to twisted pines  
Who sometimes whispered back  
Tortured Northern winds  
Howled like lovesick wolves  
As they rushed through narrow mountain passes

The rocks talked to me  
Of hard white glaciers  
That once carved out  
Granite canyons  
Now they only melted  
In the dazzling sun  
And fed cold blue streams  
Under talus slopes

Fat furry marmots  
Wouldn't talk to me at all  
As they stuffed bulging little cheeks  
Against the snowy winter ahead

Thunderheads rose  
Ten thousand feet  
Cotton castle towers  
Sent sharp white bolts  
And icy drops of life  
To sparse fragile green below  
The last rays  
Of bloody orange sunset  
Spattered alpenglow  
Over craggy peaks  
And mirror tarns

Stars flung their white hot sparks  
Across ink-black curtains  
As mountains hugged the sky  
And love filled my heart

*Alan Piltz 1991*

### **Bob Fies (1940-2023)**

*Tom Whitemore*

I regret to report that Bob Fies, a Bay Area amateur telescope maker, passed away December 19th. Bob was responsible for aluminizing amateur mirrors all over the country and was an integral part of John Dobson's mirror-making classes in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. I met Bob in early 1998 when I asked him to coat my first mirror, an 8"-er. Bob was an engineer in the aircraft industry which led to his ease at designing and building a high-vacuum aluminum deposition system in his garage. With this deposition system he could deposit aluminum on mirrors up to 20" in diameter. In order to overcoat and protect the freshly-deposited aluminum, he built a clever crucible-based feature that allowed "five-nine" purity glass pellets to vaporize before the system was brought up to air. This technique protected the aluminum from oxidation once the vacuum system was opened to air. His services were used all throughout the country's amateur telescope making community. I used his services at a number of the mirror-making workshops I started in the Bay Area with Jane Houston-Jones and the workshop I founded at the

Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Bob will be sorely missed. Who will fill the gap he now leaves for the ATM community?

<b>AU Information Box</b>		
<b>President:</b>	Jerry Wilson	252-2206 <a href="mailto:jerryawilsonphd@gmail.com">jerryawilsonphd@gmail.com</a>
<b>Vice President:</b>	Ron Herron	<a href="mailto:vicepresident@sbau.org">vicepresident@sbau.org</a>
<b>Secretary:</b>	Andy Allen	<a href="mailto:secretary@sbau.org">secretary@sbau.org</a>
<b>Treasurer:</b>	Pat McPartlin	964-8201 <a href="mailto:treasurer@sbau.org">treasurer@sbau.org</a>
<b>Equipment:</b>	Tom Totton	562-8795 <a href="mailto:equipment@sbau.org">equipment@sbau.org</a>
<b>Outreach:</b>	Chuck McPartlin	964-8201 <a href="mailto:outreach@sbau.org">outreach@sbau.org</a>
<b>Newsletter:</b>	Tom Whitemore	687-2025 <a href="mailto:kometes@aol.com">kometes@aol.com</a>
<b>Webmaster:</b>	Tom Totton	562-8795 <a href="mailto:webmaster@sbau.org">webmaster@sbau.org</a>
<b>Events:</b>	Diane Welcenbach	<a href="mailto:d.welcenbach@verizon.net">d.welcenbach@verizon.net</a>
<b>Merch Manager:</b>	Pat McPartlin	964-8201 <a href="mailto:parsnip7@yahoo.com">parsnip7@yahoo.com</a>

### **SBMNH Astronomy Programs Manager**

**John Winckowski** 682-4711 ext. 164  
[jwinckowski@sbnature2.org](mailto:jwinckowski@sbnature2.org)

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### **AU mailing address:**

Astronomical Unit  
c/o Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History  
2559 Puesta Del Sol Road  
Santa Barbara, CA 93105-2998

**On the Web:** <http://www.sbau.org/>

# The Astronomical Unit

c/o Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History  
 2559 Puesta Del Sol Road  
 Santa Barbara, CA 93105-2998

JANUARY 2024						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2 EARTH AT PERIHELION	3	4	5 "HYBRID" AU MONTHLY MEETING 7PM	6
7	8	9 "TELESCOPE TUESDAY" AT CAMINO REAL MARKETPLACE 7PM	10	11	12	13 ZOOM PLANNING MEETING 5PM STAR PARTY 6PM
14	15	16 MOUNTAIN VIEW SCHOOL 4PM	17	18 SANTAYNEZ SCHOOL 4PM	19 WESTMONT PUBLIC STAR PARTY 6PM	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			