

Lunar Views: The Often Avoided Moon

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I think like many amateur astronomers, I went through a period where the moon was my enemy. How rude it was of the moon to wash out the dark sky. How could I lose so many nights of looking at faint fuzzies through the biggest aperture telescope I could haul around? How could I find my way around the sky when the glare from the moon hides all but the brightest stars? Why set up for astrophotography when the moon will wash out the photograph in less than five minutes? Why is it only cloudy on nights when the moon is not in my way? The moon, the mother of all light pollution.

One of the philosophies of many a military leader throughout history is to know your allies, but know your enemies even better. I decided that I must conquer the moon! Now of course I cannot destroy it or alter its orbit. I am powerless to push it out of my way. However, it is completely in my power to observe it, to study it, to photograph it, to stare in amazement at all of the tiny features on its surface, and to stand back in awe.

Since making that conscious decision, the moon and I are on far better terms. Now I can go to sleep at night after some time behind the scope knowing that I did not let the moon ruin yet another crisp, clear night. My enemy has become one of my dearest friends.

My timing on this decision could not have been better. Soon after, there were three publications released that I think have had quite a bit of impact on renewing interest in the moon amongst the astronomy community. One was the publication of the "The Lunar 100" by Charles Wood, you can find this article on the internet at: http://skyandtelescope.com/observing/objects/moon/article_1199_1.asp. Mr. Wood has spent his whole life as a professional selenographer, so he has a vast understanding of our nearest celestial neighbor. This list includes what he believes are the 100 most interesting structures on

the moon in terms of understanding the processes that have shaped it. The second publication was also by Mr. Wood, a book entitled “The Modern Moon: A Personal View”. I recently acquired a copy of this book and have thoroughly enjoyed reading and re-reading it. I might also add that Mr. Wood continues to pass on his knowledge of the moon through a regular column in Sky and Telescope entitled “Exploring the Moon”. The third publication was actually a revision and re-release of a classic book “Atlas of the Moon” by Antonin Rukl.

There are many reasons the moon makes a great target for observation, so I’ll go down my list:

1) The moon is almost always present. Except for a few days around new moon, you can always go out sometime throughout the night and the moon will be there. You don’t have to wait for months, or in the case of Mars for years, for it to reappear.

2) The moon is almost always present, but each night it is different. As the moon travels about the earth, the sunlight strikes it from a different angle, constantly changing the highlights and shadows. New features are visible one night, then gone the next. One secret every lunar observer knows is that the most interesting place to look at is the terminator, the rough edge where sunlight meets darkness on the face of the moon. This is where the shadows are longest and the rugged terrain on the moon is most visible.

3) The moon is very easy to find. If the moon is up, a quick sweep of the sky will tell you exactly where it is. No need for charts and star hopping, its just there!

4) Even the most modest of equipment can bring many nights of enjoyment. A small scope works wonderfully with the moon. Binoculars on a tripod work well also. You don’t need a budget-busting 12-inch Newtonian to look at the moon. Its simple and easy, and its inexpensive.

5) The moon just has its own beautiful, raw appeal. If you don’t believe me, try this experiment on someone who has never looked through a telescope. Try showing them three or four of your favorite

faint fuzzies and see how long you hold their attention. If they are not natural-born astronomers, my guess is about five minutes. Now, try showing them the moon. Listen to the comments they make on their first peek through the eyepiece. Ask them if they would like you to zoom in on a particular crater and see what they say. The moon truly is a beautiful place that will spark interest in almost anyone.

Think back to the first time you looked at the moon through a telescope, you had that same reaction. But, I suppose in our quest to see more and more things in the heavens, a lot of us forgot about the object that probably ignited our interest in the first place. What I have found is that by studying the moon at a deeper level, by understanding the forces that formed the moon and its mangled surface, by understanding why the Apollo astronauts were sent to the locations they visited, I have regained a fondness for my former enemy. As I go about writing future editions of this column, I hope to rekindle a love of the moon that you to may have lost once. If you never lost your love of the moon, I hope my words and thoughts help you enjoy it even more.

You are welcome to contact me by email at doug@ShoestringAstronomy.com, and view some of the astronomical fun I have at www.ShoestringAstronomy.com