



Cosmic Challenge: The ultimate observing list for amateurs

by Philip S. Harrington

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This book aspires to a high ideal – to be the ‘ultimate observing list’, and while many observing lists abound, this book does a pretty good job of being a ‘one-stop shop’ of observing targets, from ‘easy’ naked eye objects, to faint, difficult objects only visible in the largest of amateur scopes.

There is a short introductory chapter on preparing to observe, which has some useful thoughts on visual observing, binoculars, telescope collimation, filters and dark skies. All these topics are aimed to get you ready for the challenges to follow.

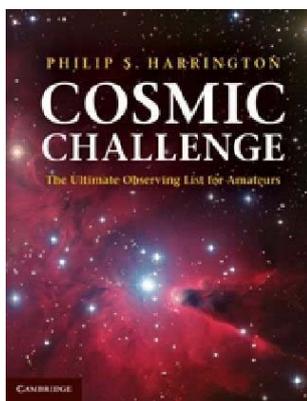
Into the meat of the book, and the 188 challenges are organised initially into six categories; naked eye, binocular, small-scope (3 to 5-inch [75–125mm] telescope), medium-scope (6 to 9.25-inch [150–235mm]), large-scope (10 to 14-inch [250–355mm]), and monster-scope (15 inch [380mm] and larger). The challenges are then organised by season (spring, summer, etc.), and an ‘all-year’ category. Each challenge is further qualified with a ‘star rating’, from 1 star (easy) to 4 star (very hard). Actually there are not that many 1 star challenges, which include, for example, the lunar landing sites on the Moon using binoculars. Some of the 4 star challenges are definitely challenges – for example spotting M81 with the naked eye, and splitting Pluto and Charon using a monster-scope.

Each challenge is described with helpful text about the object and interesting background information, a chart (where appropriate), and an illustration of the visual view.

As you will have realised by now, this is not just a deep sky observer’s book. Many of the challenges include observing the Moon and planets, so this is a book for everyone.

If one is being picky, there are a few deductions. The book is for observers in the northern hemisphere, but some objects will be more difficult or impossible from the UK due to their low declination. Many of the illustrations of how objects appear through the eyepiece don’t seem to have rendered

well, and can be difficult to make out in good light, let alone in the field. And some of the challenges sound downright impossible from UK skies. I am happy to be corrected, but I am not sure anyone has observed Barnards Loop with the naked eye from the UK. However, from some of the dark sites in America, I am sure this could be



achieved.

But I would heartily recommend this book. The book was three years in the making and it shows. A great deal of care and attention to detail has been spent. It is well written, has an interesting selection of objects suitable for all observers with varying degrees of difficulty, has good descriptions and nice charts. I don’t think it is intended to be a book to work through from start to finish, but there are many ideas and gems to alight on, so just dip through and you’re sure to find something of interest.

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Callum Potter is a keen deep sky observer, writes the Journal Sky Notes and is a regular contributor to Astronomy Now magazine.

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