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CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

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CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

Ken Tapping, 17th December, 2013

Even at this late date, you might still be looking for things to give the family astronomer for Christmas. I hope this is of some help.

A telescope sounds like the ideal gift for the family astronomer. However, the choice of telescopes is now, astronomical and the range of “gotchas” you can run into has got bigger too. It is not possible to provide a useful discussion here, so here are some points. Firstly, unless you know exactly what the family astronomer likes to do, it is best to make your Christmas present a card saying, “After Christmas we are going out to get you a telescope”. There are some excellent sources, most of which advertise in the Canadian magazine “Skynews” which many stores carry, or in the US magazines “Astronomy” and “Sky and Telescope”. If the choices are bewildering, head along to the local science store and make a choice after a face-to-face conversation with an expert. If you’re not an expert, seek the advice of an expert. If there is no science store within a couple of hours’ driving range then contact the amateurs at the local astronomy club. Don’t buy a telescope from a department or big box store unless you really know what you are doing. There are some good telescopes out there, but there are many that amaze me they can be sold legally. Few store assistants know enough to provide any useful guidance. A couple of years ago I saw a telescope for sale in the optometrist section of a big store. It had been put together wrongly and could not possibly work like that. Go see the experts.

Every amateur astronomer should have a pair of binoculars. A good, general-purpose choice would be a pair of reasonable quality 7x50’s, that is a magnification of seven times and with objective (light collecting and image forming) lenses 50mm in diameter. These will collect around 100 times more light than your unaided eyes and will be great for cruising the Milky Way and looking at star clusters and comets. Try them first. They should be completely comfortable to use, and do not

require “getting used to”. A common problem is for the two telescopes making up the binoculars not to be pointing in the same direction. Our brains can correct this problem to some extent, but at the expense of headaches and discomfort if the binoculars are used for any length of time. If possible, go to the science store.

Every family astronomer needs a planisphere. This useful tool consists of two plastic discs with a rivet through the middle. Line up the time of day on one disc with the date on the other, and the window shows the sky at that time. A book worth having is the “Observer’s Handbook”, published by the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. It is published annually, and lists all the predictable the astronomical events happening that year. There is also a wealth of other information. You can get this at science stores and good book stores; otherwise you can buy it on line at the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada website.

The number of books on amateur astronomy is now huge. Check out books by Canadian astronomical authors Terence Dickinson and Alan Dyer. A good stocking stuffer could be a copy of “Skynews” magazine, “Astronomy”, or “Sky and Telescope”. There is a huge range of other astronomical hardware, but here it is best to get information from the intended recipient and from other amateur astronomers. The key point is to give someone things that will lead to a lifetime’s enjoyment and voyage of discovery, not another dust gatherer in a cupboard somewhere.

At 12:11 EST (09:11 PST) on the 21st, the Sun reaches its southernmost point in its yearly travels – the winter solstice. Venus shines brightly, low in the Southwest after sunset. Jupiter and Mars rise about 6 pm and 1am respectively. Saturn rises around 5am. The Moon will be Full on the 17th and Last Quarter on the 25th.

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