

The Benefits of “Geekdom”

Standing with my family, watching the sunset on top of Cadillac Mountain in Maine’s Acadia National Park, my Blackberry buzzed to tell me I had a new e-mail. It was an alert from spaceweather.com about an impending geomagnetic storm, including a notice that the aurora was likely to be visible later that night in upper latitudes. Viewing, it said, would be best starting around local midnight.

We didn’t know if our location at around 44 degrees north latitude was “upper” enough, but we figured that a dark mountaintop with a 360-degree sky view might give us an edge. We returned around 11:30—the only people up there - and saw what looked like a thin white cloud to the north in an otherwise cloudless sky. And it was lit up, as though reflecting lights from a city or a stadium beneath it. Only thing was, the ground beneath the “cloud” was dark. We figured out the best settings on our cameras to photograph this cloud in the middle of the night and were amazed to see that what looked white to us looked green to the cameras!

I quickly shot a picture with my phone of the image on the camera’s monitor and sent it to Chip, K7JA, whom I knew had seen auroras in Alaska and asked him if that was what we were seeing. By the time he texted back a “Yes!”, the answer had become obvious to us as parts of the cloud began to brighten and shoot out rays of light above and below the main area. Then the cloud began to expand vertically and the whole thing started drifting to the west. Directly overhead, the “carpet” of the Milky Way was clearly visible, and—this being a week before the peak of the Perseids—every few minutes, a meteor flashed by. It was truly a magical evening ... that the four of us enjoyed in total solitude. No one else, it seemed, knew about the celestial show going on over their heads.

“The benefits of geekdom,” I joked to my daughter. “If I wasn’t on spaceweather.com’s e-mail alert list, we wouldn’t have known about it either.” She responded, “Not too many people even know there’s such a thing as ‘space weather.’”

So... is there a ham radio connection here? Did I turn on my 2-meter FM rig and work Alberta off the aurora? No. First of all, Au doesn’t “work” effectively on FM, and secondly, I was too entranced by the visual aurora to even think about radio.

But this aurora resulted from a coronal mass ejection from the sun, an event which affected radio communications here on Earth as well as touching off visible aurora overhead. Such solar events are common in a rising sunspot cycle and have touched off speculation in the popular press about “killer flares” that could fry electronics here on Earth and cause billions—maybe trillions—of dollars of damage to our telecommunications infrastructure.

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These “killer flares,” along with speculation at the other end of the solar spectrum that we are heading toward a period of decades with no sunspots, were the subjects of Dr. David Hathaway’s talk, “The Sky is NOT Falling,” at the Huntsville Hamfest a few weeks later. Hathaway is a solar physicist at NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville and one of the nation’s leading authorities on the sun, sunspots and solar-earth interactions. The crux of what he talked about—in terms of “killer flares,” the “death of sunspots” and his newest predictions about Cycle 24—are reported on this issue’s news page, so I won’t repeat them here. But the audience was another demonstration of the benefits of geekdom.

“I like coming here to talk,” said Hathaway. “Hams actually understand and appreciate what I’m talking about.” Fortunately for those of us who are not solar physicists ourselves, Hathaway is a lively and engaging speaker, and able to explain exceedingly complex matters of solar dynamics in terms that a well-educated ham can understand. The flip-side, of course, is that we hams like to hear what Dr. Hathaway has to say. And it is a testament to our collective interest in the science behind the art of radio communication that arguably the nation’s leading expert on the sun and sunspots is willing to give up part of his weekend once a year to come talk, unpaid, to an audience of hams. The appreciation and respect are mutual.

Young Hams...

The Huntsville Hamfest was home once again to the annual presentation of the Newsline Young Ham of the Year award, of which CQ is a co-sponsor. This year’s winner is 11-year old Kaitlyn Cole, KS3P, of Harvest, Alabama (see profile on page 69). In addition to coming to the hamfest to receive her award, Kaitlyn was also there to work, running the youth lounge for other young hams and children of hams. Activities included a scavenger hunt, a foxhunt and a learn-to-build table, where kids (with adult supervision) learned to solder by building code oscillators. We were visited by one family (see photo) with two children who successfully completed this project. Activities like these are incubators of the next generation of young hams, especially when run by other young hams themselves. Speaking of which, we saw a very healthy number of younger adult hams at Huntsville, many of whom were accompanied by their own young children. It is clear that such efforts as the Young Ham of the Year award and hamfest youth lounges are having an impact and are helping to attract more young people into our hobby. I continue to be confident that ham radio’s future is in good hands. (PS to young hams: it’s OK if people think you’re a geek. Geekdom is cool. It opens doors to meeting top scientists and being the only one to know when to go look for an aurora!)

73, W2VU



The Aurora Borealis as seen from Maine in early August. Rachel Moseson photo)



The Clark family at the Huntsville Hamfest, including dad Mark, W4CK; mom Laura, KJ4HCU; son Will, WB4CSK; and daughter Sara. Will and Sara built working code oscillators at the hamfest’s youth lounge.