January 2008 SOB Meeting Cancelled!!

The January 14, 2008 Meeting of The Sound of the Baskervilles will not be held...for several reasons:

- The Master's Dinner will have occurred the week before, and the January Meeting traditionally has the lowest attendance!!
- The dark nights and winter weather of January keep many away as it is!!
- The Seattle Sonics will be playing the LA Lakers in basketball and, although the Sonics are not performing up to expectations, the fans continue to show up in droves at T. S. McHugh's!!
- PFL David would rather have Members enjoy each Meeting than have to compete with the rowdiness and noise of the other patrons.

We will, of course, reconvene at T. S. McHugh's as always the 2nd Monday of February—that's February 11th!!

Holmes as Fuzz Ball? *Comet Turns Up the Lights*

Compiled from: The Tacoma News Tribune, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, San Jose Mercury News, The Knoxville News Sentinel—October 27 to November 5, 2007

Astronomers and backyard stargazers are going gaga this week over the flying fuzz ball known as Comet Holmes (properly "Comet 17P/Holmes").

First discovered in 1892, the comet has played hide-and-seek with star-watchers ever since, often too faint to see with a telescope as it orbits the sun every seven years.

"This is truly a celestial surprise," said Paul Lewis, director of astronomy outreach at the University of Tennessee. "Absolutely amazing."

Until Oct. 23, the comet had been visible to modern astronomers only with a telescope, but that night it suddenly erupted and expanded. A similar burst in 1892 led to the comet's discovery by Edwin Holmes. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime event to witness, along the lines of when Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 smashed into Jupiter back in 1994," Lewis said.

Thanks to a so-called "outburst" of gas and dust as the comet skirts the sun, the normally faint comet has intensified in brightness 1 million-fold since Wednesday night (October 25). The comet, which is about two miles across, is currently cruising through space somewhere between Mars and Jupiter and can be seen near the constellation Perseus, and even in well-lit cities and even to the naked eye, should be strutting its orange-yellowish asymmetrical stuff.

"Ordinarily you'll see a comet brighten as it gets closer to the sun or the earth," said Ben Burress, staff astronomer at the Chabot Space & Science Center in Oakland. "But the rapidness with which this one blossomed caught everyone by surprise. It was like a kernel of popcorn going off." The outburst, Burress said, "caused a cloud of gas and dust to balloon around it, making it easier to find."

A sky chart from a Web site like the one at skyandtelescope.com will help.

"To recognize it," said Burress, "you have to be fairly familiar with how the stars normally look, and then find one that doesn't look like it belongs there. Once the sun goes down, it'll be in Perseus in the northeast sky just above the horizon, then it will appear to circle the North Star, ending up in the northwest of the sky by dawn."

Martin Gutoski, with the Fairbanks Astronomical Unit, said the best way to find the comet is to locate the constellation Cassiopeia and then move down about halfway toward the horizon and slightly to the right. The comet is easy to tell apart from the surrounding stars, especially since its mysterious brightening. Gutoski thinks the comet, made of ice and frozen gas, is shooting off gas for unknown reasons. "Whatever it's doing, it's burping big time," he said. "This is probably a lot of gas boiling off."

Holmes will be visible in the sky for the next several months.

Edwin Holmes (London) was a regular observer of the Andromeda galaxy (M31), so he knew the region very well. On the evening of 1892 November 6, with skies that were not very favorable, he finished making a few observations of Jupiter and some double stars with his 32-cm reflector, then decided to take a quick look at the faint companions of Mu Andromedae and the nearby galaxy M31 before quitting for the night. Turning the reflector toward that region, he saw what he thought was M31 enter the field of the finder, but when he looked through the eyepiece he saw something different. Holmes said he "called out involuntarily, 'What is the matter? There is something strange here.' My wife heard me and thought something had happened to the instrument and came to see." The object in the field of Holmes' telescope was a comet with a coma about 5 arc minutes across and with a bright nucleus. The date was then November 6.98. Holmes was able to determine a rough position on November 7.03, before clouds moved in. He immediately wrote to E. W. Maunder (Royal Observatory, Greenwich), W. H. Maw (England), and Kidd (Bramley). Kidd immediately expressed some skepticism about Holmes' find because of its nearness to M31; however, on November 7.75, Kidd and Bartlett spotted the comet with the naked eye. The comet was independently discovered by T. D. Anderson (Edinburgh) on November 8.9 and by J. E. Davidson (Australia) on November 9.5.

From: http://cometography.com/pcomets/017p.html