Meeting of the Eagle Valley Astronomical Society

November 10, 2011 7:30-9:00 PM

Walking Mountains Science Center, Buck Creek Road, Avon, Colorado

Contact: Lara Carlson, Community Programs Director, Walking Mountains Science Center, 970-827-9725, ex. 129, or John W. Briggs, HUT Observatory, jwb@hutobservatory.com, 970-343-0618.

Topic: "Understanding the Solar System"

The newly created Eagle Valley Astronomical Society will meet Thursday evening, November 10, starting at 7:30 PM at the Walking Mountains Science Center on Bush Creek Road in Avon. Local astronomer John W. Briggs will speak on "Understanding the Solar System." Mr. Briggs serves as astronomer in residence at HUT Observatory near Eagle, and many of his recent observations relate to comet and asteroids. Working with New Mexico Institute of Technology in Socorro and a team involving other small observatories as far away as Italy, Briggs measures how fast asteroids rotate in space. In his presentation, Briggs will explain basic facts about the planets, and he will show how anyone can locate them in the night sky. Jupiter, for example, is presently very bright and well placed. To the unaided eye it appears as a bright star rising in the east in the early evening. Weather permitting, an 11-inch computer-controlled telescope will be set up at the Science Center to allow views of distant Uranus, which is so far away in the solar system that it appears only as a tiny disk.

Mr. Briggs will demonstrate free software called Stellarium that allows anyone with a home computer to understand the sky in detail. Also, he will relate results from a very unusual event occurring on the night of November 8, when an asteroid designated 2005 YU55 is passing by Earth only 85% as far away as the Moon. This object is the brightest asteroid known to have passed so close to the Earth, and astronomers all around the world will be monitoring it. Observers using Earth-based radar will map its surface in detail comparable to what is normally recorded only by robotic spacecraft. From Eagle, Mr. Briggs will see only a star-like object, but it will be changing brightness in a measurable way corresponding to its rotation. At the meeting, Briggs will explain more about the event and will share HUT Observatory images showing the fast motion of the object as seen against the starry background of the sky.

Additional technical details about the the near-Earth asteroid can be found at http://echo.jpl.nasa.gov/asteroids/2005YU55/2005YU55_planning.html and http://www.minorplanet.info/ObsGuides/YU55/.

Attached: Photo of John W. Briggs with one of the instruments in his collection of antique telescopes.

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