

Combing the Sky for Comets

Stargazers Gather to Get a Glimpse of Hale-Bopp

By Lesley Mahoney

SPECIAL TO THE FORUM

Four telescopes and close to 40 sets of eyes combed the night sky Saturday in search of Comet Hale-Bopp on the northwest horizon.

To the naked eye, the much heralded comet is a fuzzy white-yellow ball of light trailing a glowing tail. Through a telescope it is a brighter, pulsing tailed orb streaking through the darkness.

Comet Hale-Bopp is a hot topic these days as people everywhere exchange tales of where and when they first spotted the ball of light that won't make a return trip to our solar system for another 4,000 years.

Last weekend, astronomy buffs and curiosity-seekers alike gathered with members of the South Shore Astronomical Society in Norwell to get a glimpse of the comet.

Saturday's public viewing was the second of two scheduled by the South Shore Astronomical Society. The first, set for March 29, was canceled when Mother Nature decided to put on a light show of her own complete with roaring claps of thunder and vibrant bolts of lightning.

Because the Blizzard of '97 left a blanket of snow over the planned viewing location at Centennial Park, organizers moved the communal sky gazing event to the Council on Aging parking lot across the street.

Judging by the oohs and ahhs murmured by viewers of all ages as they gazed at the comet after wait-

ing for the comet to appear through telescopes, the spectacle was worth the wait.

Kathy DeVasto-Piemont, of Pembroke, set up her own newly-purchased telescope. A member of the South Shore Astronomical Society's board of directors, DeVasto-Piemont has only been studying the sky seriously for a couple of years. She recently bought the sophisticated telescope she was using from another society member.

"I've always been awed by the sky, but I never knew anyone else who was interested," said DeVasto-Piemont who learned about the society while working at her Norwell catering business.

DeVasto-Piemont said the first time she saw the comet was at 4 a.m. one morning a few weeks ago.

Discovered independently by two amateur astronomers in July 1995 — Alan Hale, of New Mexico, and Thomas Bopp, of Arizona, — Hale-Bopp is most visible about an hour before sunrise or an hour after sunset.

"It was so bright I thought it was a plane," DeVasto-Piemont said. "I thought, 'Wow, I've never seen anything so bright.'"

While she is impressed with Hale Bopp, DeVasto-Piemont said the constellation, Orion, which she calls by its technical name, M41, takes her breath away.

Waiting in line for a peek through DeVasto-Piemont's sleek black telescope, Dale Fenno, of Norwell, said one of her favorite things to do is sit on her porch and watch shooting stars.

She first saw Hale Bopp while

driving on the highway in Braintree and said she feels fortunate to have the once-in-a-lifetime viewing opportunity.

"It all makes you realize how little you are. It's just amazing," said Fenno as she looked up at the sky. "Through the telescope, it's wonderful. It looks so clear — like a bright ball. It's beautiful, just beautiful."

Louis Gentile, vice president of the South Shore Astronomical Society, said it was "mind boggling" that the faraway comet was visible with the naked eye.

When it was first observed in 1995, Hale-Bopp was 700 million miles from Earth. Astronomers predicted it would come within 123 million miles of Earth reaching its closest point on March 23.

Now is prime time to view the comet in the northwest sky after sunset as the moon, and its interfering light, move out of the way. It will begin gradually to appear lower and lower on the horizon.

"We love this sort of stuff," said Gentile who explained members of the society began observing Hale-Bopp in the pre-dawn hours several months ago when it was not as easy to see with the naked eye.

Gentile, 42, a Scituate resident who runs a piano business, said his fascination with the sky and its wonders began as a child when he received his first telescope.

"There's a feeling of awe in

knowing the things you see through a telescope, or right in your own back yard, are light years away," Gentile said. "To me, it puts in perspective our relative position to the rest of the universe."

"It humbles you," he said.

Marshfield residents Steve Pineault and his wife have been viewing Comet Hale-Bopp since it first appeared on the horizon.

"One can't help but think there is something else out there," he said.

Rolf Egon, a former president of the South Shore Astronomical Society, said he likes Hale-Bopp because it is much brighter and easier to see than Halley's Comet which passed this way in the mid-1980s or last year's Comet Hyakutake.

"This is much nicer and has a full, clear tail," said Egon, who was inside the Council on Aging displaying a piece of an original meteorite that hit the Arizona desert between 35,000 and 50,000 years ago.

Joe Marques, the current president of the South Shore Astronomical Society, said looking through a telescope is "an almost spiritual" experience. He said a friend tells him that what you see through an eyepiece took 20 million years to get there and it will just "go through the telescope and fall to the ground" if there is no one there to look at it.

Marques, who lives in Hanson, said he is fortunate his job as an engineer allows him to travel to places that offer a clear view of the night sky.

"I love my wife and my hobby," he said.

South Shore Astronomical Society treasurer Tenny Doble has his own observatory at his Duxbury home. He said his interest in astronomy began about about 20 years ago when he met a park ranger who had a telescope set up and fixed on the planet Saturn. That interest lay dormant until about six years ago when Doble began spending more time outdoors.

"I decided not to smoke in the house anymore and I needed something to do outside," he said.

The beauty of Hale-Bopp did not escape the children in the crowd, some of whom ran in circles pointing at the sky.

"It's cool and it's tail is pretty long," said 10-year-old Adam Nogueira, of Norwell.

To get your own glimpse of Comet Hale-Bopp, look high in the northwest sky at twilight. You'll find it streaking along just beneath the brightest star, Capella. If Comet Hale-Bopp has sparked a more than fleeting interest in astronomy for you, call (617)447-

2744 for a recorded message on viewing times or (617)447-2071 to speak with Joe Marques.