

The Hazards of Astronomy

Kevin Dohmen *knows the warning signs — but he stargazes anyway.*

Astronomy doesn't readily fit into the same hazard category as, say, bungee jumping, mountain climbing, or scuba diving in shark cages off the Great Barrier Reef. Until January 2001, when my wife bought me a Meade ETX-90 for my birthday, I saw astronomy as purely sedentary, even boring.

One mid-February look at Jupiter's creamy disk and Galilean moons, though, and I was hooked! I immediately e-mailed my friend Geoff Chester, an amateur astronomer of some 35 years, the public-affairs director at the U.S. Naval Observatory, and now my astronomy guru. I told him I was quitting my job and moving to the desert to observe the celestial sphere every night.

Geoff said my reaction is not uncommon, that fanaticism is one of the hazards of astronomy. "Hazards? What hazards?" I asked. Geoff chuckled, intimating that I would soon find out.

I was reminded of the scene from *The Empire Strikes Back* in which Yoda doubts Luke's ability to become a Jedi Knight. Luke says, "I can be a Jedi. . . I'm not afraid."

Yoda responds, "Oh, you will be."

For the next six months I was outside on every clear night, drinking in magnificent views: Jupiter, about 45 light-minutes distant; Saturn's crisp rings, nearly twice as far; the Orion Nebula, 1,600 light-years away. Fantastic! I also discovered some of the inherent hazards of astronomy, which I began to tabulate:

1. Hypothermia
2. Stiff neck
3. Sleep deprivation

Hypothermia was easily conquered with microfiber clothing, the stiff neck with an observing chair. Sleep deprivation seems unsolvable, but our son, now seven, slept for no more than 90 minutes at a stretch until he was more than two years old — so little sleep is doable.

By summertime, two more items had made the list:

4. Mosquitoes
5. Poison ivy

These were solved with insect repellent, long pants, and socks.

July, however, produced an unexpected hazard. I had set up at a local ballpark. Second base provided a clear angle to the south for a view of Mars at opposition. By 11:00 p.m. I was happily observing that tiny rusty marble, trying to glimpse a hint of polar ice cap through the humid atmosphere with my little scope, when two police cruisers pulled in fast, lights flashing, and grveled to a stop behind my car.

A sturdy officer, maybe 1½° tall from where I stood, shone a long flashlight into my car. In the wash of headlights I could just make out the dark smudge of a handgun against the blue of his uniform.

Meanwhile, I'm standing 75 yards away in a dark ball field, invisible to him because of his bright lights and my black T-shirt. Walking slowly toward the scene, I sing out, "Helloooo! Helloooo!"

The officer, his back to me, startles. He spins and points the flashlight in the vicinity of my

voice, his other hand instinctively at his holster. I'm concerned he will see the strange shape of the telescope aimed in his direction. With my hands overhead in a gesture that I hope communicates both "Over here" and "I surrender," I continue slowly toward him.

He rapid-fires a series of questions. "What is your name?" I tell him. "This your vehicle?" Yes, it is, Officer. "Your address?" I recite it immediately, including full nine-digit zip code. "What are you doing out here?" We are now close enough to see each other.

"Looking at Mars."

"Where is it?" he asks.

I point over his head to the south. "There." He doesn't look.

"What can you see?"

"Not much, really," I say. "Mars is small and very far away. There's this dust storm, and . . ." I realize this is all too much, so I pull up short. To break the silence I ask, "Want a look?"

"Are you aware that this park closes at sundown?" he says. "Some residents were concerned about your vehicle being here after hours."

"Sorry, Officer, I didn't mean to worry anyone. I'll leave."

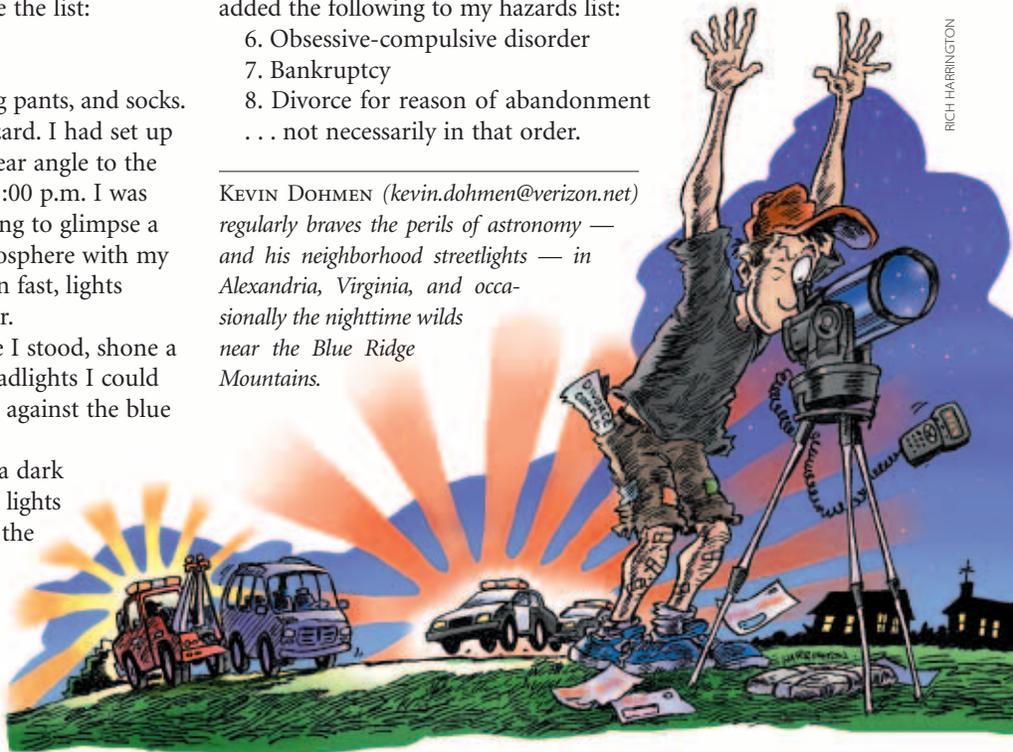
The radio gurgles. The other cop says something. "No rush," my officer says to me, his voice more relaxed. "Enjoy your evening." They get in their cruisers, douse the flashing lights, and drive off.

The next day I considered adding "Accidental shooting" to my list and e-mailed a description of the night's events to Geoff, who lives a block from the park. He explained that a week before some kids had egged some houses and cars, and the neighborhood was edgy. He suggested calling the police before observing at the park. The Jedi have a solution for everything.

Since my police adventure, I've graduated to a Celestar 8 and have begun playing with star charts and digital webcam imaging. I have blissfully lost hundreds of hours of sleep and have added the following to my hazards list:

6. Obsessive-compulsive disorder
 7. Bankruptcy
 8. Divorce for reason of abandonment
- . . . not necessarily in that order.

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RICH HARRINGTON