



UNH Celebrates Astronomy Year With Lecture Series Launching March 7

Media Contact: [David Sims](#)
603-862-5369
Science Writer
Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space

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DURHAM, N.H. - Four hundred years ago, Galileo Galilei pointed his telescope towards the heavens for the first time and ushered in the age of modern observational astronomy. His observations fundamentally changed our understanding of the universe.

In celebration of the milestone, NASA has declared 2009 the International Year of Astronomy. Among the host of events that will occur worldwide, the University of New Hampshire physics department presents a series of weekend lectures given by UNH faculty, staff, and students in an effort to help promote interest in the field of astronomy.

The lectures are free and open to the public and each date will correspond with free public viewings at the UNH Observatory later that evening, weather permitting.

The first lecture will be held Saturday, March 7, 2009. UNH physics senior George Clark will present "Sunspots, Flares, and the Northern Lights," which will provide vivid details on how explosive storms on the Sun's surface affect humankind.

When these storms - known as solar flares - erupt, energy equal to more than a million atomic bombs is ejected into space. If the Earth is in the impact zone of these violent events, a cloud of high-energy particles slams into Earth's magnetic field with the potential to damage spacecraft and communication systems (both ground-based and satellites) and to cause potential health hazards to astronauts. These flares also produce the benign and beautiful Northern Lights.

"All these lectures are designed to engage members of the general public from eight to 80 years old," says associate professor Mark McConnell of the Space Science Center at the UNH Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space.

McConnell will give the second lecture in the series on Saturday, April 18, 2009. Entitled "Earth Attacks! A History of Martian Exploration," McConnell will highlight mankind's fascination with the red planet from the "discovery" of Martian canals in 1887 through modern-day exploration using robotic spacecraft. "Along the way we will see how Mars has played a major role in science fiction," notes McConnell.

The third and final lecture of the semester will be held Saturday, May 16, 2009. UNH instructor John Gianforte will discuss "The Search for Other Worlds," which will explore the topic of "extrasolar" planets. Just since 1995, astronomers using several different ingenious techniques have discovered more than 340 of these planets outside our solar system, and more are being added every month.

All lectures will be held in DeMeritt Hall (UNH-Durham campus) room 112 from 3 to 4 p.m.

For more information on the UNH lecture series visit http://physics.unh.edu/observatory/IYA_lectures.html and for more about NASA's IYA activities visit <http://astronomy2009.nasa.gov>.

The IYA logo is available to download at:
http://www.eos.sr.unh.edu/newsimage/iya_logo_lg.jpg.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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