

# Comets Seen and Unseen

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First of all, to get this off my chest, I did not manage to see Comet McNaught, though not through want of trying. Between clouds and ice crystals, I was foiled at every attempt. The closest I came was on the morning of January 10: I scanned the dawn sky for an hour without any success, took a brief break, and then came out at 8 a.m. to see this:



Figure 1 — A sun pillar. Photo by the author.

For a brief moment, I thought the comet had flared up overnight. Then a few seconds later the Sun appeared in the trees directly under my “comet” and I knew I was looking at a sun pillar, one of the largest and most beautiful I have ever seen. I also knew that the ice crystals that were causing the pillar were also the reason why I hadn’t seen the real comet.

This was not the first comet I have missed. That distinction goes to Comet Arend-Roland. That comet had a path opposite that of Comet McNaught. It started out as a modest object in the southern hemisphere in the early months of 1957, rounded the Sun in mid-April, and first became visible to observers in the northern hemisphere on April 20. One of the first people to spot it, on April 21, was a young lad in Edmonton named Franklin Loehde, whose report appears in the June 1957 issue of *Sky and Telescope*. A comet that big and bright naturally made it into the newspapers, which is where I learned about it in the last few days of April. To a 16-year-old geek in Montreal, it sounded like something exciting to look at, so, on the night of May 1, I went out on my back porch with my brother’s copy of *New Handbook of the Heavens* in hand

to see if I could spot this comet.

Unfortunately, I was a bit late. The comet had faded significantly by then, and had moved into Camelopardalis, that most unpromising of constellations. Trees and houses blocked that part of my sky anyway, but if I had been luckier, this is what I might have seen:



Figure 2 — 30-minute exposure of Comet Arend-Roland on May 1-2, 1957, taken with a 3-inch Ross patrol camera by students at Mount Holyoke College.

What I did see was a very bright object about half way up the sky to my south. Even though this was my first night as an amateur astronomer, I was pretty sure this was not the comet. Then what was it? With the help of the star chart in my book, I identified the stars immediately above it as the triangle and sickle of Leo. Using Leo as a guide, I identified Arcturus in Boötes. But there was certainly no bright star just south of Leo, so I knew my bright object had to be a planet! The next day I did some further detective work with the limited resources available to me (where was the Internet when I needed it?) and decided that this must be Jupiter, a deduction that later proved

to be correct. The next clear night I was out again, identifying five more stars and two more constellations. Arend-Roland forgotten, I became totally obsessed with my new-found starry friends!

Later that summer at my family's cottage in the Laurentians, when I was out under a really dark sky for one of the first times, I spotted a comet! At first I thought I'd finally found Arend-Roland, though I wondered how I'd overlooked it for so long. A few days later, I learned in the newspaper that this was the *second* bright comet of 1957, Comet Mrkos.



Figure 3 — Comet Mrkos during its passage in 1957 showing its smooth dust tail, and its turbulent gas/ion tail. Photo courtesy NASA.

I joined the Montreal Centre a couple of months later and astronomy assumed an even larger portion of my life for the next seven years. Then graduate school, teaching, marriage, divorce, *etc.* took over my life, and I didn't look through a telescope

for decades, though I did continue to enjoy the night sky with my unaided eyes whenever the opportunity arose. Then in 1996, Comet Hyakutake caught my attention. I plotted its position on my star atlas and located it one night from my cottage, then followed it from downtown Toronto as it raced across the sky. In March 1997, I was with my family on vacation in New York City when, early one morning, I chanced to glance out the window of my hotel room and saw this humungous comet hanging in the sky, framed by a couple of skyscrapers. This was Comet Hale-Bopp, by far the best comet I had ever seen, and it started the astronomy neurons in my brain humming. *Were these comets trying to tell me something?*

For the previous 16 years, I had been using a Meade 8-inch Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope, one of the first ones made. It was the most expensive telescope I had ever owned, but the views were always disappointing compared to those I had seen as a teenager. Since this was a state-of-the-art telescope, I concluded that my eyes were shot, and so my astronomical prospects were limited. Then one day, in a spurious moment, I bought one of the cute little Meade ETX 90 Maksutov-Cassegrains that had just come on the market. My first views through it were a revelation! I was seeing the Moon and planets with the same detail I remembered from my youth. There was nothing wrong with my eyes: my expensive Meade SCT must be an optical lemon. Careful testing confirmed this, and suddenly I was propelled back into amateur astronomy with a vengeance.

To this day, I have mixed feelings about Meade telescopes. Their awful 8-inch SCT kept me away from the hobby for over 15 years, yet their excellent little ETX propelled me back into it. It was those comets, seen and unseen, that got me into astronomy, not once but twice. ●

## ANOTHER SIDE OF RELATIVITY

