

# Big Sky Astronomical Society

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Twenty years ago, the Big Sky Astronomical Society was founded with the sole aim of promoting a greater awareness, appreciation, and understanding of astronomy in their local area and beyond. Today, they operate the Big Sky Observatory – a wonderful, albeit small, Observatory situated under a dark sky. The story of the Big Sky Observatory and how it came to be is one that is filled with persistence and passion, and it shows that anything is possible when a small group of dedicated people work towards a common goal.

From the very beginning, the Big Sky Observatory was destined to be located far from city lights so that visitors could behold the beauty of the night sky. However, finding a suitable location that met all the criteria, such as accessibility and affordability, proved rather difficult. Luckily, that all changed in 2004 when the Twin Valley Dam opened. Soon afterwards, the Big Sky Astronomical Society was able to secure a long-term lease from Alberta Environment on a small parcel of land, located adjacent to the new dam. With the Observatory site selected and finalized, the focus then shifted to fundraising and eventually construction.

Thanks to the generous donations of literally hundreds of people, as well as a few companies and community organizations, the Big Sky Observatory was finally constructed and had its Grand Opening in 2008. Since then, it has had a significant enhancement, thanks to several more donations from many big-hearted people, as well as a grant from the Government of Alberta. This facility enhancement resulted in the Observatory becoming 100-percent solar powered. Thus, the light from the nearest star now powers their equipment and allows them to capture and record the light from billions of distant stars.

Every summer, out at the Observatory, many people gather to watch shooting stars during the Annual Perseid Meteor Shower Event, but they get to see much more than just meteors because they also have an opportunity to look through the big 14-inch (35

centimetre) Observatory telescope and that allows them to view the Great Globular Cluster in Hercules (M13), the Dumbbell Nebula (M27), and the Ring Nebula (M57). Visitors also enjoy looking at other celestial objects too, such as Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the Moon. Those that have never done this before are often overwhelmed by the beauty of Saturn and are amazed by the remarkably close-up view of the Moon. Some of them even snap a photograph of the Moon by holding their phone up to the eyepiece of the telescope.

Some nights out at the Observatory are dedicated exclusively to members and some of them don't mind driving more than 100 kilometres so that they can see the Milky Way, far away from city lights. These members routinely set up their own equipment and capture beautiful images of the cosmos. They like to photograph distant galaxies and nebulae, as well as star clusters. The incredibly dark sky out at the Big Sky Observatory more than makes up for the long drive to and from the city.

Only time will tell what the next 20 years will hold for the Big Sky Astronomical Society, but there is already talk of installing an all-sky camera out at the Observatory to capture images of bright meteors. These images could then be made available to everyone, via a website, in near real-time and this would help researchers in the recovery of meteorites on the ground, the next time one lands here in Alberta. There is also talk of constructing a "warm room" next to the Observatory, which would allow the Big Sky Observatory to be used more often during the winter months.

The Big Sky Observatory is located approximately halfway between Calgary and Lethbridge. You will find it next to the Twin Valley Dam, which is situated on Highway 529, midway between Highway 2 and Highway 23.

Visit the Big Sky Astronomical Society website ([www.bigsky.ab.ca](http://www.bigsky.ab.ca)) to find a listing of upcoming public events. You can also find them on Facebook and follow them on Twitter. If you would like to make a tax deductible donation to the Big Sky Astronomical Society, you can do so by visiting their website.



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