Deep-Sky Planner

By "Uncle" Rod Mollise

Get a Plan: Deep-Sky Planner Version 5.1

As those of ya'll who've read my previous software reviews know, I love computer programs. Especially amateur astronomy computer programs. And planners to be even more particular. What's a planner? A planner is an astronomy soft that is list-centric. One is designed to help you see lots of stuff by making observing lists – organized lists – of objects to view on a given date and time from your location. One can also help you find objects and record your observations when you've found them. Some well-known observing planning programs are *SkyTools*, *Deepsky*, *AstroPlanner*, and *Eye and Telescope*. And *Deep-Sky Planner*.

I was excited to get my hands on *Deep-Sky Planner* (*DSP*); I am always happy to get the chance to try a new piece of astro-software. Actually, Phyllis Lang's program ain't new. Not hardly. It's been around for over a decade; it's just new to me. I'd been meaning to give it a spin for the longest time, but requesting a review copy from Miss Phyllis kept getting moved to the end of Unk's ever-expanding to-do list.

I had had a look at *DSP* once, a brief look. Somebody at a star party somewhere showed me a (crippled) evaluation copy of the software, and I was impressed by what I saw. Then and there I should have called Ms. Lang and arranged to review her program,
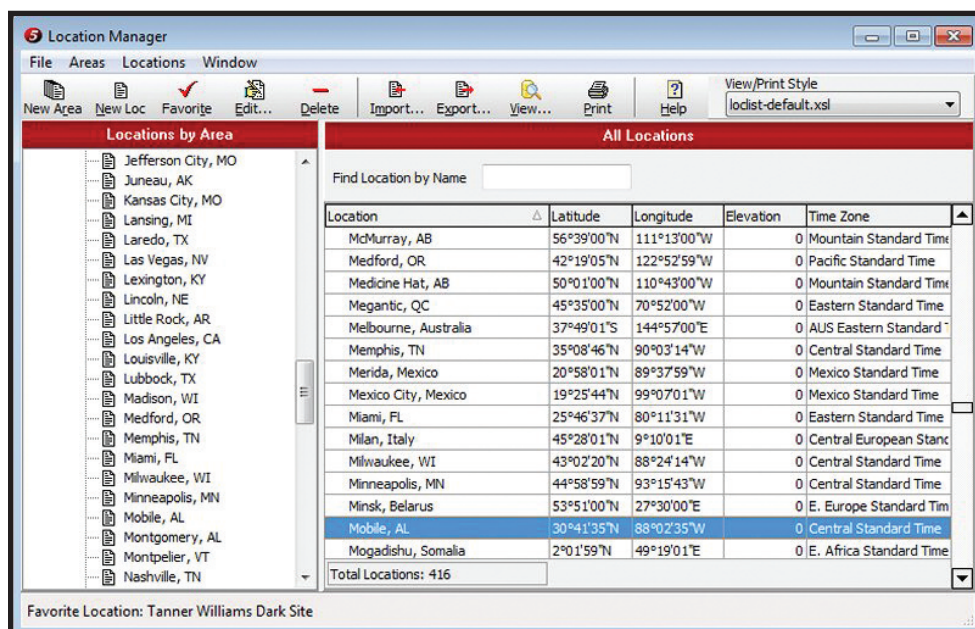

Image 1

maybe with an eye toward including it in the software section of my last book, *Choosing and Using a New CAT*. Foolishly, I didn't.

Thank goodness I have finally got around to trying *Deep-Sky Planner*. Phyllis emailed me the other day and asked if I'd like to see a copy of *DSP*, the new *DSP*, *Version 5*. I was embarrassed it had taken me so long to try Deep Sky-Planner, but it turned out that was actually a good thing: *DSPv5* is the strongest version of this program, yet.

Deep-Sky Planner is, like most astron-omy software these days, available two ways: as a downloadable file from the program's website, where it is sold for the very reasonable sum of $65.00, or as a CD that will be mailed to you for the also very reasonable price of $73.95. While I could have downloaded *DSP* and been using it the very night I exchanged emails with Phyllis, I requested a CD instead. Lots of amateurs, especially older semi-Luddite amateurs like Uncle Rod, still prefer a brick and mortar product, and I wanted to run through the procedure of in-
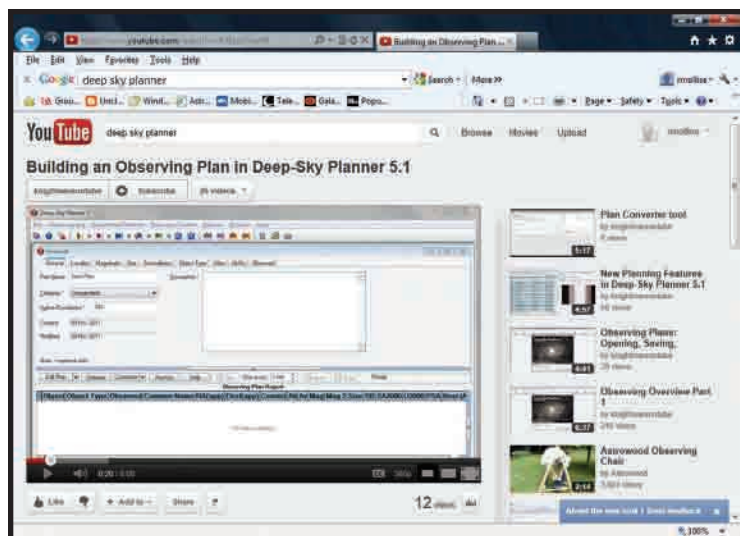
Image 2

Image 3

stalling *DSP* from CD. Oh, if I haven't mentioned it thus far, sorry Mac mavens: *Deep-Sky Planner* is *Windows* only.

In just a couple of days, the CD fell through the mail slot of Chaos Manor South with a plop, scaring the cats and bringing me on the run. Hot dog! A new 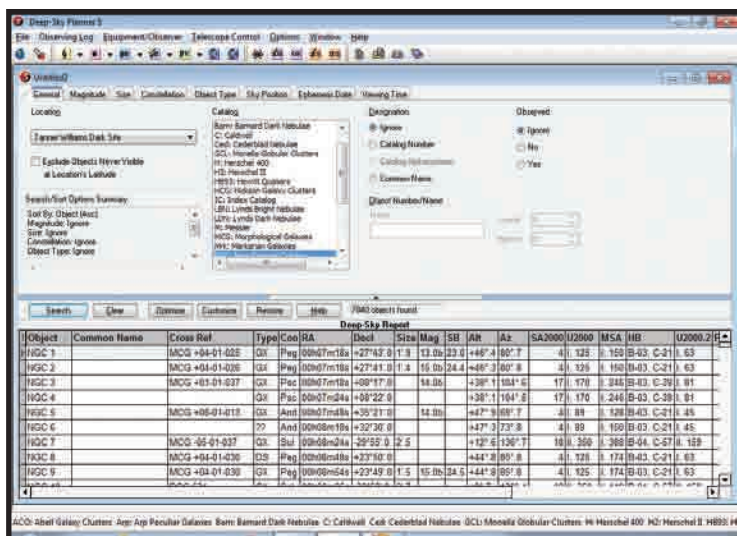astro-soft! I wasn't quite ready to get started with the program, however. What was on the CD was *v5.0* of *Deep-Sky Planner*; yeah, but Phyllis had alerted me that a major update, version 5.1, was waiting in the wings and would be ready in just a week or two. I decided I would install the version on the CD, but would stop there till I could download the update from the *DSP* website.

The first part of the install process held no surprises. Insert the CD in the optical drive, in my case the external USB drive I use with my astro-computer, an Asus netbook, click a few "OKs," and I was done with Step One. There is a Step Two; however, "activating" the program once it is installed on the hard drive.

The activation procedure is clearly explained in the docs that come with the CD, and shouldn't have been a problem. Unfortunately, it was for me. Due to a nasty little bug, the (mostly) automated process didn't work just right. When it completed, the website warned me that the registration number I would need to enter would not be emailed automatically, and that it might take a short time for it to be sent. Alas, I had the feeling it would never be sent – it was pretty obvious from the error message I got that something had gone wrong with the activation process.

Phyllis was on the ball, sending me an email right away that advised me to download a fix that would exterminate the bug and allow me to complete *DSP*'s activation. I got the bug-busting update from the website, reran the activation, and shortly had the required number entered in the program. Not that it would have been a tragedy if I hadn't been able to obtain the code right away. You can use *DSP* for 30-days before it must be activated. I find the registration/ac-

tivation process, which is fairly common with astronomy software, annoying, but I do understand the need for it.

Then I left the program alone and waited for the *5.1* update. When I heard it was available (via *DSP's* active Yahoo group), I immediately downloaded and installed it. Somehow, I resisted the urge to dig in and start playing figuring I ought to have at least an idea of how much horsepower was under the hood. The program's extensive Help system, which is also available as an Acrobat file, is really a well-written and extensive manual. I didn't feel like wading through 295 pages, but I did scan the program's specs:

- Over 1,000,000 objects in the database. Many are cross-referenced.
- Sun, Moon, and planet data can be calculated for any instant or over a range of times.
- Same-same for comet/asteroid data.
- Comprehensive logging facilities which are tightly integrated with the program's database reports.
- Supports the Sky Quality Meter (an electronic widget that tells you how dark your skies are).
- Manages multiple observing projects.
- Selective data backup and restore.
- Export reports in .html and other formats. Compliant with *OpenAstronomyLog 2.0* standard.
- Provides telescope control with ASCOM.
- Smart integration with *TheSky, Starry Night, RedShift,* and *Cartes du Ciel.*

Sounded good. It was clear this was no lightweight of a program, and I resolved to sit down with the manual eventually (as I always advise y'all to do with planning programs), but for now I just wanted to mess around and get a feel for how *DSP* looked and worked.

Clicking the icon the install program placed on my desktop caused hard drive activity, and after a not overlong waiting period with my somewhat speed-challenged netbook, *DSP's* main screen appeared. It's a little plain, but that is OK; it's generally good to start with a clean slate, and I get annoyed with planners that try to cram too much onto a "home page."

What you get with *Deep-Sky Planner* is a fairly standard *Windows* menu bar: "File," "Options," "Window," and "Help." Naturally you've also got some astro-oriented choices, too, "Observing Log," "Telescope Control," and "Equipment." Below that is an icon bar with small but well-designed pictographs. Running the mouse pointer over them will reveal help bubbles in case you have trouble puzzling out what the icons do.

Where to start? Every astronomy program wants to know about location and time. I pulled down "Options" and had a look. Sure enough, there was "Location Manager" (**Image 1**). It was easy to select my little city from the list that appeared when I expanded "United States" on the tree menu. If my city had not been on the list, or if I had wanted to specify a custom site with my exact observing location, that would have been easy to do by pushing the "New Location" button on Location Manager's toolbar

and entering latitude/longitude, time zone, and the other usual things.

Like most planners, *DSP* also wants to know about your equipment: telescopes, eyepieces, filters, Barlows, and cameras. Gear setup is accessed by going to the Equipment menu (also under the Equipment menu) and selecting "instrument browser," "eyepiece browser," etc. as required. One minor criticism? Most planners provide lists of the most common equipment, and all you have to do to add your stuff to the inventory is click on it. You can download some equipment lists from the *DSP* "Community" web pages (accessible from within the program with Help/Community Page), but these are just static text files. NOT a big deal. Equipment entry is something you don't have to do often, and the process of adding gear is simple.

After I finished keying-in my gear, I entered myself with "Observer Browser," and it was time to get rolling with an Observing Plan. No, I still hadn't got around to reading the instructions – y'all know my lack of patience with manuals, even well-written ones. I did think it would be a good idea to get some guidance before putting together my first Plan, though, and watched a video, a YouTube video, on the subject (**Image 2**). If you have the appropriate TV/Blu-Ray/game console, you can even watch Phyllis' excellent presentations on your big-screen TV while sipping…er… "sarsaparilla," which is what Unk did.

Turned out all I had to do to start a Plan was click "New" on the File Menu, select
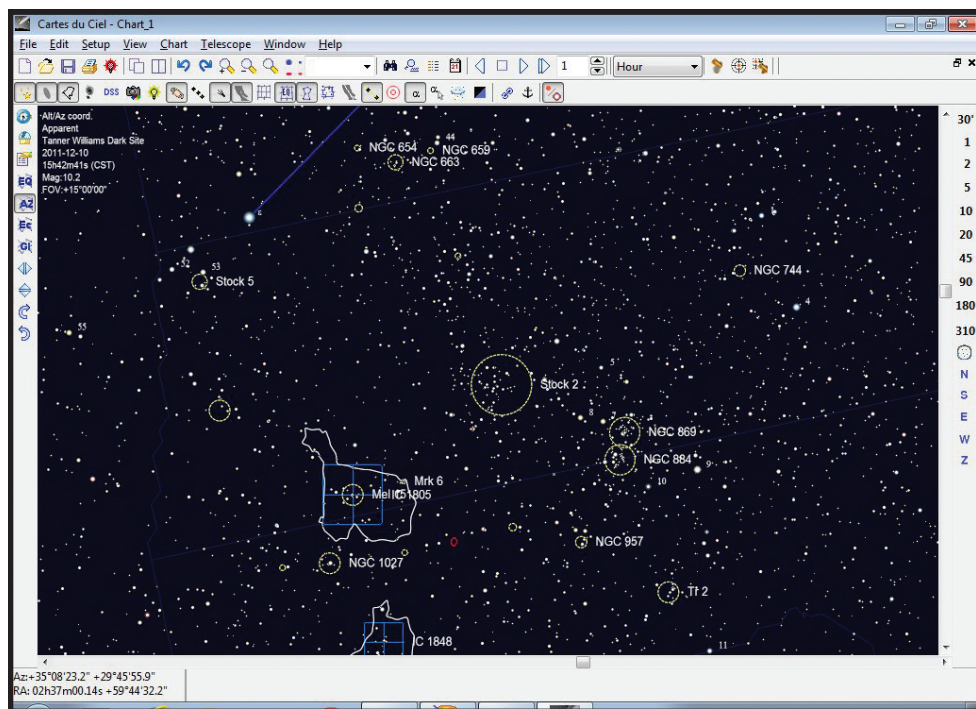
Image 4

New Observing Plan, and – bang! – I had an empty Plan Document onscreen. Gotta populate that…with objects, of course. I decided I'd put together a Plan from one of Sue French's tours from her wonderful new book Deep-Sky Wonders. After a little head scratching, I clicked the arrow beside the little galaxy on the icon toolbar, which the bubble-help told me was "Deep Sky Catalog Search Documents," and then "NGC."

There are mucho filters you can apply, but I wanted to see how the program dealt with great big lists, and just hit Search, which would put the whole NGC in my Search Document.

Good news: the NGC list (**Image 3**) came up quick like a bunny, and scrolling though it was fast and responsive. It was now time to move objects from the Search Document to the Plan, and I really appreciated

the program's "drag and drop" paradigm. All I had to do to add objects was scroll to 'em, highlight 'em, and drag 'em into my Plan. I tiled my Plan and the Search Document horizontally onscreen to make dragging and dropping easy. If I'd needed to, I could have used shift-click and ctrl-click to highlight and drag contiguous and non-contiguous groups of objects.

Want to find stuff from different catalogs without switching catalogs? Close the NGC Search Document, mash the little galaxy icon rather than the arrow next to it, and highlight all the catalog choices (about 25) in the list window on the Search Document that appears. Enter the object's catalog designation in the "Common Name" field on the right, hit the Search button, as I did with Stock 2 from Sue's list, and you will shortly have your target object in the Search Document. Most of the time.

DSP's collection of catalogs is not lavish – I couldn't find Sue's somewhat offbeat Stein 368, a double star – but in my judgment it is more than good enough. Since you can easily enter objects manually with the "Edit Plan" button, having every single obscure catalog is not a necessity.

It was the work of but five minutes to produce my small Plan of seven objects. Was there anything I didn't like about it when I was done? There is no perfect software, and *Deep-Sky Planner* is not an exception. I couldn't find a way to display object details beyond the fairly basic data that's in the plan spreadsheet. I like, for example, to know a galaxy's Hubble Type. This is not fatal, however. Since you'll normally be using *DSP* in conjunction with a planetarium (star charting) program, you'll have that program's object info resources at your beck and call.

We've got a Plan. What next? There might not need to be a next. Carry the PC and telescope into the field and run through the list, ticking the "Observed" box for each object that's seen. But this program is capable of a lot more cool stuff than that. For example, I like to have pictures of my targets available to help identify the harder stuff. Like most other current planners, *DSP* can

download object images from the *Digitized Sky Survey*.

Somewhat unintuitively for silly ol' me, you set up image-fetching on the "Localize" tab at the top of a Plan, where you assign an image server and specify image size and other parameters. The program will then append an image LINK to each object in the plan. You then download each picture individually and store it on the local drive if you want to do that. You can tell the program to automatically acquire images for objects without stored pictures, but you still have to click on each object to start downloads.

This image-handling method was one of the few things I did not like about *DSP*. I would like to be able to download batches of object pictures. If I'm going to hit a hundred Herschels tonight, I want an image for each of them, and I don't want to have to click on each one to download its picture. I took this complaint to Phyllis and she responded that adding a batch-download facility is one of her top priorities for the next release.

What else do you need for a night under the stars? You need a chart. Or you may want one, anyway. Even with a go-to rig and an extensive plan, it's nice to know what else is in the neighborhood of your targets. Some planners deemphasize charting, and *Deep-Sky Planner* is one of them. At least it does not have a charting engine of its own. You won't miss that, though. The program interfaces nearly seamlessly with today's top planetariums, including *Cartes du Ciel*, *TheSky*, and *Starry Night*.

Why are the charts "smart," as touted in the program specs above? Because *Deep-Sky Planner* does more than just center the object of your desire (right click on a Plan object and choose "charts") on the planetarium program (**Image 4**). *DSP* tailors the field-size of the resulting chart to suit you. You can even tell it to size the chart based on the size of the target object. Way cool. No, using an external planetarium is maybe not quite as convenient as having a built-in charting system, but, on the other hand, you do not have to learn a new charting system with *DSP*.

You've got a plan, pictures, and charts.

Ready to go? Not so fast. If you've got a go-to rig, don't you want to send it on its go-tos with *Deep-Sky Planner*? I've only had the chance to try *DSP* with my ETX-125 thus far – it worked great – but I have no doubt it will work well with almost any go-to scope. Why? It uses ASCOM. That universal telescope-driver system makes it a no-brainer that your go-to rig will interface with *Deep-Sky Planner*.

Well, almost any go-to rig that has an ASCOM driver should work with an ASCOM compatible program, anyway. AstroPlanner, another planner I like very much, worked very well with any ASCOM driver except EQMOD, which is used to operate an Atlas/EQ-6 mount without a SynScan go-to hand control. That wasn't a huge shock. EQMOD is, after all, a very complex driver. Could *DSP* handle it? I connected to the EQMOD simulator to see.

Deep-Sky Planner worked so well and so smoothly with the simulator that I can't imagine it not working with the real thing (I will give it a try in the field ASAP). Since *DSP* does not have onboard charts, you can't click on and go-to alignment stars on a map; you'll have to put together a Plan list of alignment stars to get the Atlas go-to aligned, but that will be easy. I was just overjoyed that it appeared Phyllis' wonderful program would work with EQMOD. What was even cooler? *DSP* adds a telescope-control icon bar to the screen when a scope is connected. These buttons – park, unpark, track, and more – worked like a charm with EQMOD.

When you are done looking at your deep-sky wonder, you'll usually want to log it. All I need is a place to record the bare facts: object, date, time, and my comments. *Deep-Sky Planner's* log works fine for that, but it is capable of doing a lot more. You can record the current weather conditions in detail, for example. If you have an Internet connection you can even get a weather report via a mini-browser built into the log.

The bottom line? I love *Deep-Sky Planner*. Not only does it have tons of features, it has very good bones. It never crashed. It never did crazy things. It just worked. Are there things I'd like to see in it that are not there? There always are with any program. In addition to my comments concerning object info and pictures, I'd like to see a more robust Import function. Yes, you can import data from programs that support the *Open Astronomy Log* format, but I could not see a way to import Plans/objects from a plain text file. The good news is that Ms. Lang has produced a small subprogram to do that very thing. At my request she used it to import all 2500 Herschel objects into a Plan for me.

This is a great soft. I've had a lot of fun using it already, and I suspect you will, too. So, why doncha? Try it, that is. You can download an evaluation copy of *Deep-Sky Planner* for free from the website at http://knightware.biz/dsp/index.php. It is limited to the Messier and Caldwell DSOs, but is otherwise fully functional. With a few minutes and a few mouse clicks you can be enjoying this excellent program tonight. Go get it, muchachos – I insist. ATT