

Wiltshire Astronomical Society

WAS News

February 2026



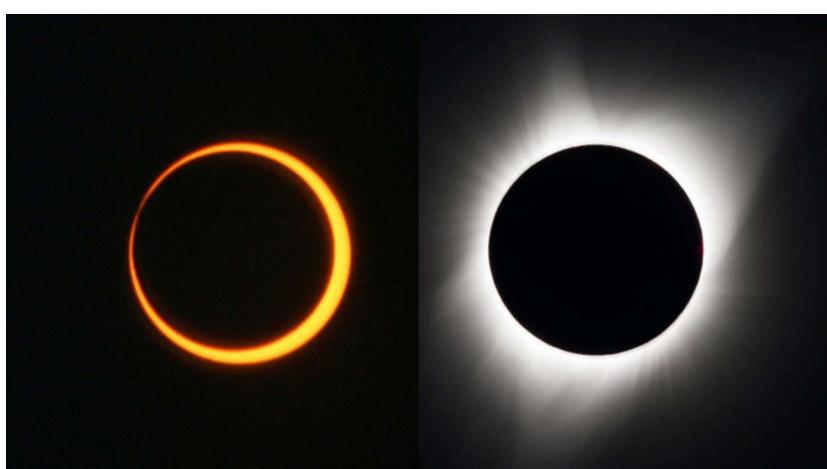
This Month We Welcome.....

John Dartnell—Society Member

After graduating with a degree in mathematics and computer science I spent my career working in IT. I combine my interest in photography and astronomy by photographing nightscapes with subject matter such as comets, meteor showers and atmospheric phenomena. I spend time chasing the Aurora in Norway and Iceland as often as I can.

The subject of my talk is information on upcoming total and annular solar eclipses in 2026, 2027 and 2028 which are visible in Europe.

Based on my experiences photographing total solar eclipses in 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2024 I will explain how to capture the spectacle of a total/annular solar eclipse on camera and, at the same time, enjoy the experience of standing in the shadow of the Moon.

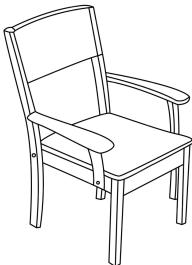


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Special points of interest

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Comments from the Chair

While our external speakers consistently deliver enjoyable and wide-ranging talks, it is always a particular pleasure when members step forward to present. These talks give us the chance to learn more about our fellow members and their individual interests within astronomy. This month we will hear from **John Dartnell**, and at the **May** meeting **Ken Whight** will be giving a talk — many thanks to both for volunteering.

This month's newsletter also features another excellent **equipment review** by **Matthew Terrell**. These reviews are especially valuable for anyone considering purchasing the equipment discussed.

If any other members would like to contribute an article on any astronomy-related topic, it would be very warmly welcomed.

Unfortunately, both observing sessions scheduled for January had to be cancelled due to poor weather. Hopefully February will bring clearer skies. As always, many thanks to **Chris** for managing the on/off decision-making for each observing evening.

As mentioned by our speaker last month, Terry Ransome, on 7 March there will be a jam-packed day of out-of-this-world events and activities as **Aerospace Bristol** hosts the first **Wales & West Spacefest**. A collaboration between **Bristol Astronomical Society**, **Bath Astronomers** and **Cardiff Astronomical Society** with Aerospace Bristol. Whether you are a space enthusiast or looking for a fun family day out with the kids, there is something for everyone to get involved in. There will be talks from Scientists, hands activities for children and interactive booths beneath Concorde. If you want to go tickets are available here together with more details:

<https://aerospacebristol.org/wales-west-spacefest>



On a sad note, news was recently announced of the passing of **Dr Allan Chapman**. He was an Honorary President of numerous societies, an eminent historian of astronomy, and a truly gifted orator. Many of us will have had the pleasure of hearing him lecture and will remember both his vast knowledge and his captivating delivery. His passing is a great loss to the world of astronomy.

I generally try to avoid copying articles from the internet; however, for this issue I have included a fully credited **Celestron** article on understanding back focus for your telescope. This takes the place of a beginners' page. If there are any beginner topics you would like to see covered in future issues, please do let me know.

Finally, as a heads-up for the June AGM, I will be looking for three or four members willing to give a short talk of around 15 minutes. If you are able to volunteer, I would be very pleased to hear from you.

There was a good display of the Aurora Borealis in January; Did anybody get a chance to see it, if you took photos I would love to have them for next months newsletter.

Clear Skies!

Simon

Quote of the Month

“The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself. Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.”

— Carl Sagan

The International Astronomical Union (IAU) is the worldwide body that coordinates professional astronomy and promotes international cooperation in research and education. Founded in 1919, it serves as the official authority for naming and classifying objects in the sky.

The IAU defines the 88 recognised constellations and their precise boundaries, ensuring every object has a clear place on the sky map. It also approves the names of planets, moons, asteroids, comets, and features on worlds such as the Moon and Mars, and sets the standards, units, and terminology used by astronomers everywhere. Its most famous public decision came in 2006, when Pluto was reclassified as a dwarf planet.

Put simply, the IAU keeps astronomy organised — making sure professionals and amateurs alike are studying the same sky using the same rules.

Long Term Review—Skywatcher Star Adventurer GTi by Matthew Terrell

As the title suggests, this is a long-term review of my Sky-Watcher Star Adventurer GTi.

I purchased it in early 2024. It has been on every major holiday and weekend away that my family has taken.

So, what's on offer, and what are the options in this “travel” segment of the market?

Well, obviously you have the “smart scopes” — but that's no fun, is it?

Then you have star trackers. These are typically EQ mountings from iOptron, Sky-Watcher, MSM, etc. I started my portable travel setup with an iOptron SkyGuider. It was one of the most impressive pieces of engineering I've used in this hobby, but often by the time you find the target, the clouds have arrived. With no guiding in declination, exposure length was often kept frustratingly short.



Next up, you have the fully GoTo-equipped equatorial mountings and small alt-az mountings. This is where the subject of this review lives — sitting between the ultra-portable backpack mounts and larger EQ3-EQ5 mounts.

The package that Sky-Watcher has come up with is impressive: a Wi-Fi-enabled equatorial mount with a 5 kg imaging payload limit and a USB port. The mount can be fully controlled either via Wi-Fi using the SynScan app or via USB. It also works perfectly with the ZWO ASIAir.

In the box, you get a steel tripod, a mini pier extension (not pictured), and two counterweights.

The build is solid and has so far stood up to solar observing and nighttime sessions in summer temperatures, as well as freezing winter clear spells with frost on everything. It's been up mountains, down to the coast, and just about everywhere in between.

The paint, however, is typical Sky-Watcher fare — somewhat lacklustre — and flakes with the lightest of knocks in certain places.

One area in which this mount really shines is the altitude and azimuth adjustment. The controls are large and easy to locate. Gone are the push-pull bolts of the altitude adjustment; instead, it's all controlled by a single bolt attached to a carrier that adjusts the altitude. The azimuth bolts work on a single peg, but crucially they are controlled from the rear of the mount, have long travel, and a fine pitch for good accuracy.

This isn't one of Sky-Watcher's quieter mounts. It has a rather coffee-grinder-esque soundtrack when indoors during the daytime, but in the garden at 01:30 it sounds like an entire coffee-grinder battalion driving around on the patio. The primary reason for this is the gearing: DC motors and planetary gears feeding into brass gears, then onto the worm and wheel. Oh, and did I mention the planetary gears are also made from some sort of cheap white plastic?

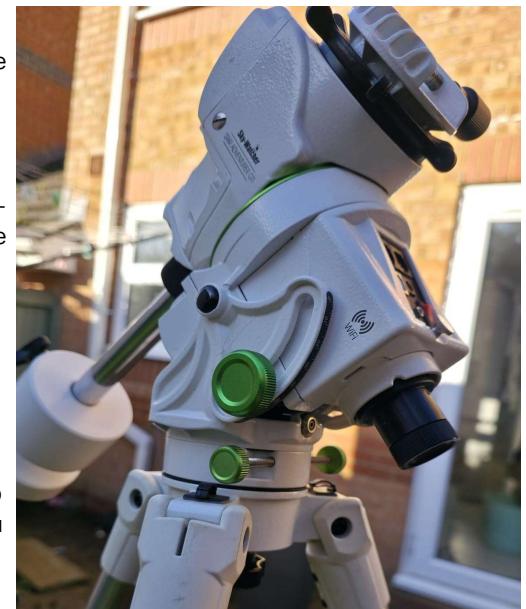
This really does bring me to my biggest complaint. In an era of belt drives, direct drives, and harmonic drives, Sky-Watcher chose this very strange approach — presumably for cost reasons. I see this as the mount's biggest weakness. I have taken the mount apart to try to identify the cause, and that is no simple task. A liberal application of silicone grease in the gearboxes seems to have helped, but not by a large amount.

This is, I believe, the reason for the mount's inconsistent guiding, especially near the zenith, even with the lightest of scopes well below the stated weight limit. The only backlash adjustment is between the worm and wheel, with the right ascension adjustment hidden under a sticker, while the declination adjustment requires removal of the outer case.

Power draw is very low, even when loaded near the limits. There is a battery bay that holds a bank-breaking number of AA batteries. I use a Bluetti power bank, which powers both the mount and the ASIAir for an entire night with room to spare. Those running a ZWO ASIAir will be pleased to know that the ASIAir can also power the mount directly.

The saddle is a simple Vixen-style design with a single bolt that, predictably, chews up any dovetail secured with it. However, there are aftermarket replacement options. You get a 3 kg and a 1 kg counterweight (some users have reported one missing, so it's worth checking). The counterweight bar can be positioned in two locations for trips to lower latitudes.

Having said that though, I would most certainly buy another, without hesitation when this one finally gives up.



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✓ Pros

Highly portable GoTo equatorial mount

Sits nicely between ultra-portable trackers and larger EQ mounts, making it ideal for travel imaging.

Good payload capacity for its size

A 5 kg imaging limit allows the use of small refractors and camera lenses comfortably.

Multiple control options

Can be controlled via Wi-Fi (SynScan app) or USB, and works seamlessly with the ZWO ASIAir.

Complete package

Includes a steel tripod, mini pier extension, and two counterweights in the box.

Solid mechanical construction

Withstands a wide range of conditions, from hot summer nights to frosty winter sessions.

Excellent altitude and azimuth adjustment

Large, easy-to-use controls with a well-designed single-bolt altitude adjuster and accurate azimuth bolts.

Low power consumption

Efficient enough to run all night from a small power bank or directly from an ASIAir.

Flexible counterweight bar positioning

Allows better balance at lower latitudes.



✗ Cons

Very noisy operation

Gear noise is intrusive, especially at night, making it one of Sky-Watcher's louder mounts.

Outdated and questionable gearing design

Uses DC motors and planetary gears (including plastic components) instead of modern belt or harmonic drives.

Inconsistent guiding performance

Particularly near the zenith, even with lightweight payloads well below the rated capacity.

Limited backlash adjustment

Only the worm-to-wheel interface is adjustable; declination adjustment requires partial disassembly.

Difficult to service

Accessing the internal gearing is complex, making user maintenance or tuning awkward.

Poor paint durability

Finish flakes easily and lacks the robustness expected at this price point.

Basic saddle design

Single-bolt Vixen saddle can damage dovetails unless replaced.

AA battery bay is impractical

Requires a large number of AA batteries, making external power almost mandatory.

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Conclusion

The Sky-Watcher Star Adventurer GTi is an impressively capable mount that fills a very specific and useful niche. It bridges the gap between simple star trackers and full-size equatorial mounts better than almost anything else currently available, offering genuine GoTo functionality, solid portability, and excellent integration with modern control systems like the ZWO ASIAir. For travelling astrophotographers who value convenience and flexibility, it is an appealing and well-thought-out package.

Its strengths lie in usability rather than outright refinement. The altitude and azimuth adjustments are among the best in its class, power consumption is low, and the mount has proven itself reliable across a wide range of environments. As a grab-and-go imaging platform for small scopes and camera lenses, it largely succeeds.

However, the GTi is held back by its internal design choices. The noisy, gear-driven system feels dated, and the use of plastic planetary gears undermines confidence in both longevity and performance. Inconsistent guiding – particularly near the zenith – and limited user-accessible backlash adjustment mean that those chasing the best possible tracking performance may find it frustrating. Combined with a fragile paint finish and a basic saddle, these compromises are difficult to ignore at its price point.

Ultimately, the Star Adventurer GTi is a mount that works best when its limitations are understood and accepted. If you want a compact, travel-friendly GoTo EQ mount and are willing to trade mechanical refinement for portability and convenience, it can be a very enjoyable and capable tool. But for users prioritising quiet operation, smooth guiding, and modern drive technology, there are now more refined – albeit often more expensive – alternatives on the market.



The February Night Sky

February still offers dark evenings and some of the finest winter constellations. Sunset occurs around **5:00–5:45 pm**, with full darkness by **6:30–7:15 pm**.

Constellations and Bright Stars

- **Orion** Visible from **early evening**, Orion reaches its highest point due south around **9:00 pm**.
- **Betelgeuse** (α Orionis): *magnitude* +0.4 (variable)
- **Rigel** (β Orionis): *magnitude* +0.1
- In Orion's Sword lies the **Orion Nebula (M42)**, shining at *magnitude* +4.0. It is visible to the naked eye as a hazy patch and stunning through binoculars and telescopes, best observed between **7:00 and 10:00 pm**.
- **Taurus** Well placed from **6:00 pm**, Taurus begins to sink after **10:00 pm**.
- **Aldebaran**: *magnitude* +0.9
- **Hyades Cluster**: *magnitude* +0.5 (spread over a wide area)
- **Pleiades (M45)**: *magnitude* +1.6, superb in binoculars before **9:00 pm**.
- **Winter Triangle** Formed by **Sirius**, **Procyon**, and **Betelgeuse**, this striking pattern dominates the sky from **7:00 pm onwards**.
- **Sirius** (Canis Major): *magnitude* –1.46 (brightest star in the night sky)
- **Procyon** (Canis Minor): *magnitude* +0.4
- **Auriga** Almost overhead between **7:00 and 10:00 pm**.
- **Capella**: *magnitude* +0.1

Open clusters:

- **M36**: Auriga *magnitude* +6.3
- **M37**: Auriga *magnitude* +6.2
- **M38**: Auriga *magnitude* +7.4

Planets

- **Jupiter** Brilliant and unmissable from **dusk onwards**, best observed between **7:00 and 10:00 pm**.
Brightness: approximately *magnitude* –2.4 Even small telescopes show cloud bands and the Galilean moons.
- **Mars** Rises during the **early evening** and is best placed after **9:00 pm**.
Brightness: around *magnitude* +0.8 (varies during the month) Its distinctive reddish colour is obvious to the naked eye.
- **Venus** When visible, Venus dominates twilight skies.
Brightness: approximately *magnitude* –4.0 Seen either shortly after **sunset (5:30–6:30 pm)** or before **sunrise**, depending on its position.
- **Saturn** Very low in twilight and challenging.
Brightness: around *magnitude* +1.0 Best sought between **5:45 and 6:45 pm** with a clear horizon.
- **Mercury** Always difficult, very low near the horizon.
Brightness: varies between *magnitude* –1.0 to +1.0 Visible for **30–45 minutes** near sunset or sunrise during favourable periods.

The Moon

- **First Quarter**: Visible **early evening**, ideal for crater detail
- **Full Moon**: *magnitude* –12.7, rising around sunset
- **Last Quarter**: Best seen **after midnight**
- **New Moon**: Dark skies for deep-sky observing!

Deep-Sky Highlights (Magnitudes)

- **Orion Nebula (M42)** – *magnitude* +4.0 | **7:00–10:00 pm**
- **Pleiades (M45)** – *magnitude* +1.6 | **6:00–9:00 pm**
- **Andromeda Galaxy (M31)** – *magnitude* +3.4 | **6:00–8:00 pm**, low in the west
- **Beehive Cluster (M44)** (Praesepe) in Cancer – *magnitude* +3.7 | Best after **9:30 pm**

Understanding Your Telescope's Back Focus— For this article full Credit is given to Celestron

Back focus is the distance from the end of your focuser's drawtube to the point where your telescope forms an image—the focal plane. When your telescope is used in its default configuration, such as with the eyepiece it came with, the system is designed to reach focus without any special effort.

Back focus becomes important when you change that setup. Adding or swapping accessories, such as diagonals, focal reducers, cameras, filter wheels, or binoviewers, changes the physical spacing behind the telescope. If your modified setup can't physically place the eyepiece or camera at the correct distance, the telescope will never come to focus, no matter how much you adjust it.

This is why a telescope that works perfectly for visual observing can suddenly refuse to focus when you add a camera or additional accessories. Nothing is wrong with the optics. The focal plane is simply no longer where your equipment can reach it.

Understanding back focus helps you choose compatible accessories, avoid frustrating trial-and-error setups, and get better results, especially when moving from visual observing to astrophotography.

Back Focus by Telescope Type

Back focus varies widely depending on the optical design. Schmidt-Cassegrain telescopes, such as the C5, C6, and C8, all offer approximately 5 inches (127 mm) of back focus, while the C9.25, C11, and C14 provide slightly more. EdgeHD models offer about 5.25 inches (133.35 mm) of back focus when measured from the reducer plate, or 5.75 inches (146.05 mm) from the 3-inch baffle tube lock ring. These generous distances make Schmidt-Cassegrains and EdgeHDs compatible with a wide range of accessories.

Maksutov-Cassegrain telescopes also offer long back focus, often around 5 inches or more, depending on the model. Newtonian reflectors, by contrast, have very short back focus—typically only about 1–2 inches—because their focal plane sits close to the tube wall. Refractors vary widely depending on the focuser design, but most flattener or reducers for refractors follow a standard 55 mm spacing from the rear shoulder of the corrector to the camera sensor.

Finally, Celestron's Rowe-Ackermann Schmidt Astrograph (RASA) offers a wide range of back focus distances depending on aperture. It's just 17.5mm with the included camera adapter for the RASA 6, approximately 25–29mm for the RASA 8, 72.8mm for the RASA 11, and 77.5mm for the RASA 36 cm.

How Back Focus Affects Your Choice of Accessories

Back focus directly impacts your ability to use accessories with your telescope. A telescope with limited back focus may prevent you from using a Barlow lens, focal reducer, binoviewer, DSLR camera, or 2" eyepieces.

Newtonians are affected the most. Two common solutions are to move the primary mirror cell forward in the tube or to install a low-profile focuser. For DSLR photography on a Newtonian, the Celestron Barlow T-adapter is especially helpful because its built-in Barlow lens pushes the focal point farther outward, creating the space needed for a camera.

Combining accessories can also reduce available back focus. For example, focal reducers move the focal plane inward. When you pair a reducer with a DSLR that needs about 50 mm of sensor spacing, you may run out of room—even with an SCT's long back focus. Spacer kits, such as the M42 Spacer Kit, help fine-tune this spacing for proper astroimaging results.

Refractor Back Travel and Other Focus Limitations

Refractors sometimes have the opposite issue: too much inward travel is required for straight-through viewing. Many refractors are designed with the assumption that you will use a star diagonal. Without one, an eyepiece or small camera may sit too far back to reach focus at infinity. In these cases, adding extension tubes in place of the diagonal fills that extra distance.

Another situation you may encounter is when certain accessory combinations make the focal plane inaccessible. For example, some 2" diagonals place the focal plane too far down inside the diagonal for short-focal-length 1.25" eyepieces to reach. Switching to a 1.25" diagonal typically solves this.

Spotting scopes typically have very little back focus and are not designed to accommodate accessories such as binoviewers or 1.25" camera adapters.

Why Back Focus Is More Forgiving for Visual Observing and Planetary Imaging

Back focus requirements are far less critical for visual observing. Simply inserting an eyepiece into a Newtonian focuser, or using a star diagonal on a refractor or SCT, usually places the eyepiece near the correct position. Visual observing uses only the central part of the telescope's field of view, where spacing errors are less noticeable. Planetary cameras behave similarly because their sensors are small and only capture the center of the image circle.

Constellation Focus — Lynx

Tucked away between the more prominent constellations of Ursa Major and Auriga lies one of the sky's most elusive figures — **Lynx**. It is not a constellation that immediately catches the eye, but therein lies its charm. Observing Lynx is a quiet challenge, rewarding patient stargazers with a collection of subtle deep-sky treasures.

A constellation for sharp eyes

Lynx was introduced in the late 17th century by the Polish astronomer **Johannes Hevelius**. He jokingly remarked that you would need the eyesight of a lynx to see it, hence the name. Unlike many classical constellations, it has no mythological background; it simply fills a previously blank region of sky.

When and where to see it

For UK observers, Lynx is best placed during **late winter and early spring evenings**. It culminates around **February–March**, high in the northern sky, making it well positioned for observation.

Look roughly halfway between **Capella in Auriga** and the bowl of the **Plough (Ursa Major)**. You won't see a clear shape — instead, trace a faint zigzag chain of stars.

Principal stars

Lynx contains no particularly bright stars:

- Alpha Lyncis** — magnitude 3.1, a red giant about 200 light-years away
- 38 Lyncis** — magnitude 3.8, often considered the next brightest
- Most other stars hover around magnitude 4–5

Under suburban skies it can almost disappear entirely, so darker locations help greatly.

Deep-sky highlights

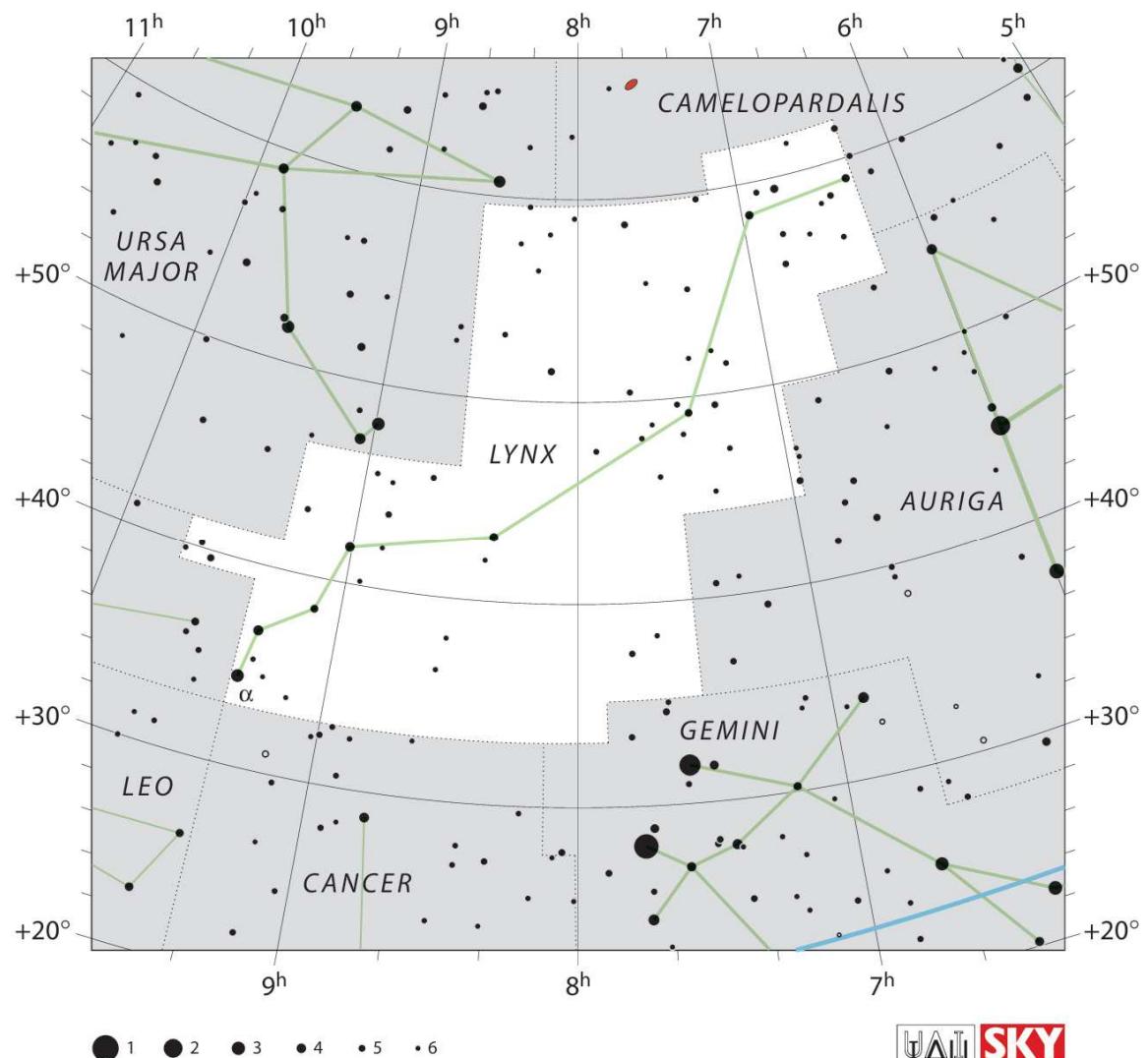
Although faint to the naked eye, Lynx hides several interesting telescopic objects:

- NGC 2419** — “The Intergalactic Wanderer” A fascinating globular cluster some 275,000 light-years away — far out in the Milky Way’s halo. At magnitude 10.4 it appears small and faint, but it’s one of the most distant globular clusters known.
- NGC 2683** — The **UFO Galaxy** A lovely edge-on spiral galaxy (magnitude 9.8) that resembles a miniature version of the famous Sombrero Galaxy. A good target for medium-sized telescopes.
- Several faint galaxy groups scatter the region, rewarding long-exposure imagers.

Why observe Lynx?

Lynx won’t dazzle you with bright stars or obvious patterns, but it encourages a slower, more deliberate kind of observing. It’s the sort of constellation that reminds us the sky isn’t just about the showpieces — sometimes the quieter corners hold the most interesting discoveries.

Constellation Focus – Lynx



NGC2419 Globular Cluster

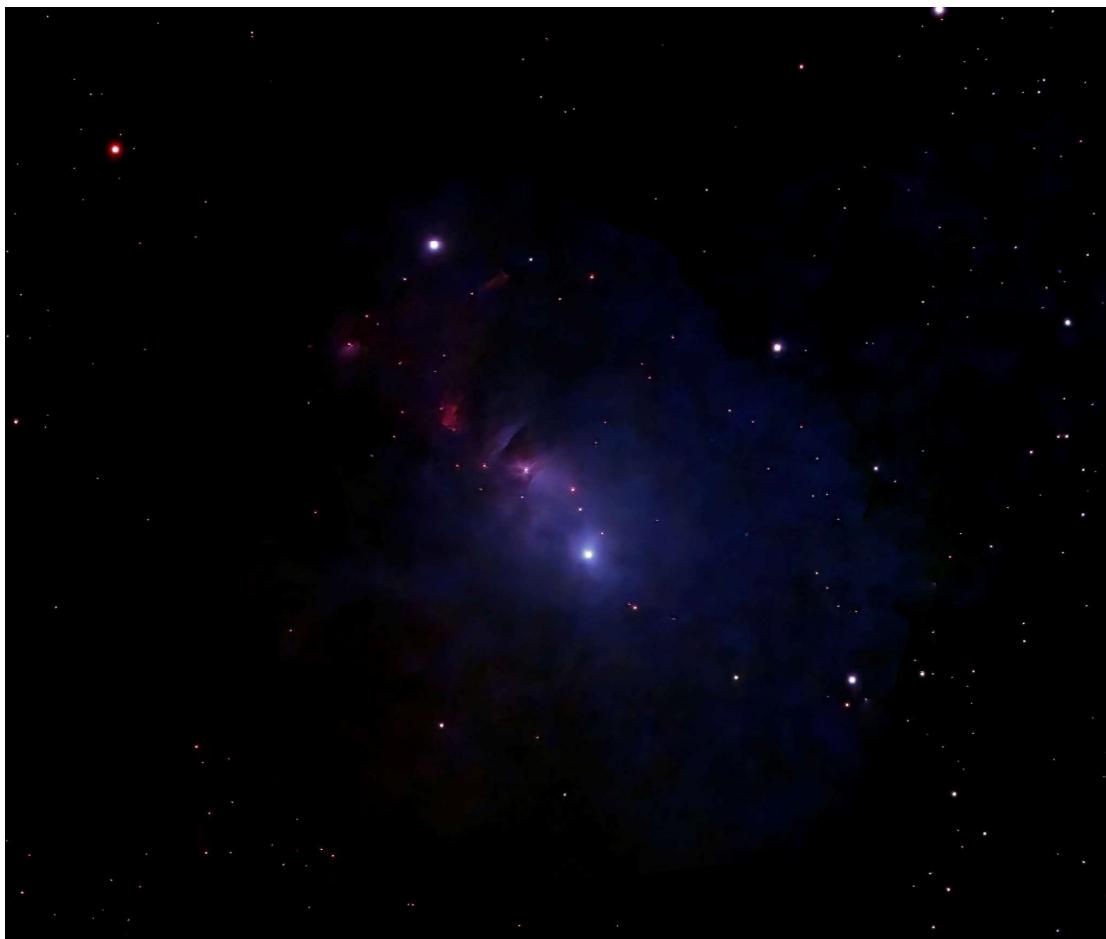


NGC2683 The UFO Galaxy

Members Gallery



Only managed 60 minutes last night before the clouds rolled in. This is 6x 600sec subs on the Leo triplet.
Steve Allen
16 January 2026



This is the reflection nebula NGC 1333. A bit of a challenge during a full moon when the sky looks more like Cleopatra's bath.

Steve Allen
3 January 2026



Moon images from Andy Burns, a target often overlooked for deep sky targets.
29 January 2026



2025—2026 Observing Schedule

Wiltshire Astronomical Society Planned Observing Evenings 2025-2026 Season								
Month	Day	Date	Month	Year		Event Attempt	Time	
Sep-25	Friday	19th	September	2025	1st Observing	Saturn close to opposition and very bright. Rings almost Edge on.	20:30	
	What To See!							
	Friday	26th	September	2025	2nd Observing	Neptune almost at opposition and a good time to try to see it. Still a good time to catch Saturn & Neptune	20:30	
	What To See!							
Oct-25	Friday	17th	October	2025	1st Observing	Orionid Metereor Shower	20:00	
	What To See!							
	Friday	24th	October	2025	2nd Observing	Orionid Meteor Shower	20:00	
	What To See!							
Nov-25	Friday	14th	November	2025	1st Observing	Leonid Metereor Shower	19:30	
	What To See!							
	Friday	21st	November	2025	2nd Observing	Saturns Rings almost Edge on	19:30	
	What To See!							
Dec-25	Friday	12th	December	2025	1st Observing	Saturns Rings almost Edge on	19:00	
	What To See!							
	Friday	19th	December	2025	2nd Observing	Uranus at Opposition just south of the Pleiades	19:00	
	What To See!							
Jan-26	Friday	9th	January	2026	1st Observing	Leonid Meteor Shower	19:00	
	What To See!							
	Friday	16th	January	2026	2nd Observing	Jupiter at Opposition in Gemini	19:00	
	What To See!							
Feb-26	Friday	13th	February	2026	1st Observing	Comet 24P/Schaumasse obsevable after 01:30 (10th)	19:30	
	Friday	20th	February	2026	2nd Observing		19:30	
Mar-26	Friday	13th	March	2026	1st Observing	Jupiter and Saturn still on display.	20:00	
	Friday	20th	March	2026	2nd Observing		20:00	
Apr-26	Friday	10th	April	2026	1st Observing	Lyrid Meteor Shower	20:00	
	Friday	17th	April	2026	2nd Observing		20:30	
	What To See!							
May-26	Friday	8th	May	2026	1st Observing	Eta Aquarids Meteor Shower	21:00	
	What To See!							
	Friday	15th	May	2026	2nd Observing		21:00	

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Wiltshire AS Meeting overview 2025/26

All meetings convene from 19.15 for a 19.30 start

MONTH	TITLE	Speaker	ACTUAL DATE
Sep-25	Adventures in Infrared	Dr Jane Clark	2nd September 2025
Oct-25	The Colourful Lives of Stars - What are stars?	Michael Barratt FRAS	7th October 2025
Nov-25	Black Holes, Dark Matter and Dark Energy	Peter Allan	4th November 2025
Dec-25	Christmas Quiz	N/A	2nd December 2025
Jan-26	Filton in Space - 65 years and Counting	Terry Ransome	6th January 2026
Feb-26	John Dartnell	Capturing Totality: Tips and Techniques	3rd February 2026
Mar-26	Observing with Binoculars	Mark Radice	3rd March 2026
Apr-26	Extinct Constellations	Nicky Fleet	7th April 2026
May-26	Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, How Can I Determine What You Are?	Ken Whight	5th May 2026
Jun-26	Members Talks & AGM	Various	2nd June 2026

Wiltshire Astronomical Society Contact Info:

Chair:
Newsletter:
Treasurer and Membership:
Speaker secretary:
Observing Sessions coordinators:
Web & IT coordinator:
PR and Design:

Simon Barnes
Simon Barnes
Sam Franklin
Position Vacant
Chris Brooks, Jon Gale,
Sam Franklin
Tracey Kelly

Contact the Society here:

Email:	contact@wasnet.org.uk
Website url:	https://wasnet.org.uk/
Public Facebook Page	https://www.facebook.com/Wiltshire-Astronomical-Society-154077261327030/
Members only Facebook group:	https://www.facebook.com/groups/wiltshire.astro.society/
Committee Page:	https://wasnet.org.uk/committee/

Observing Sessions Location: The observing area is located in the Picnic area to the side of the Red Lion Pub (Lacock) car park
Postcode: SN15 2LQ

what3words = airbag.shudders.losing



Hall Meeting Location:

Pewsham Community Centre, Lodge Road, Pewsham
Chippenham, SN15 3SY

What3words = boat.perky.ticket

