

Tips on Participating in the Messier Marathon

by John Barra Peoria Astronomical Society

Here are a few tips for those who are participating in the Messier Marathon:

- 1. BE PREPARED:** The Boy's Scout motto is a good one for the marathon that is twelve hours long. Have a good plan of attack. Included at the end of this article is one suggested order to follow. Get the star charts you are going to use and study them.
Do not forget to bring the extras you will need such as a red flashlight, extra batteries for your Telrad or other battery-operated equipment, and a dew zapper. You will have dew in the spring. If you don't have one, bring a hair dryer and a long extension cord.
- 2. GET THERE EARLY.** Get to the site as early as you can, at least by 6:30 pm. The first object viewable will be M45, the Pleiades, at 6:45. If you are set up by then you can get a few of the brighter objects out of the way fast, even if they are actually listed lower on the list.
- 3. HAVE A PLAN ON THE TOUGH EARLY OBJECTS.** You will not have much time between the first signs of darkness, around 7 pm., and the time several of the first tough objects on your list will set in the west. You must be prepared for them. M74 and M77 will be particularly hard to locate. M74, a faint galaxy in Pisces, will undoubtedly be the toughest to find all night. I have trouble finding it when it is high in the sky if seeing conditions are not excellent. It has a low surface brightness. You will need to find a target nearby star and be able to find it fairly quickly after 7. M77, a galaxy in Cetus, is a little easier and you can locate it first because it is brighter.
- 4. VIEW AS MANY AS YOU CAN AS EARLY AS YOU CAN.** Once you completed the first ten, you can slow your pace a little. However, since you have the most energy early, you need to move across the sky at a fairly good pace. You may need the extra time on the dreaded Virgo Cluster. You should be able to get through the first 48 by 10:30 or 11 pm. By then the Virgo Cluster will be in a good position in the sky to attack.
- 5. TAKE A BREAK BEFORE THE VIRGO CLUSTER.** Now is a good time to take a break. Have some coffee. Go inside. Rest your feet. Have a snack. After 15 minutes or half an hour, you will be ready to go again.
- 6. PREPARE FOR VIRGO CLUSTER.** You will need a good plan to wind your way through the Virgo Cluster, comprised of 14 galaxies in Virgo and Coma Berenices. I recommend you follow the path suggested in the chart on pages 42 and 43 of the May 1994 issue of *Sky & Telescope*. It starts in the eastern edge at Epsilon Virginis and goes toward the west rather than following the west to east, right ascension order from the list below that works well with most of the other objects. If you have *Uranometria 2000*, copy the charts on pages 192 and 193 and highlight the path suggested in the article. That night if you get halfway through and get lost, don't panic. Start over again and the second time you will be able to quickly get back to the last galaxy you had observed.
- 7. VIEW ALL THE OBJECTS DOWN TO THE EASTERN HORIZON:** Continue to view as many objects as you can now as you cross the sky at a leisurely pace to the eastern horizon. If you have been successful so far, by about 1:30 am you should have completed 90 of the 110 objects. No more will be high enough above the eastern horizon to view now.
- 8. TAKE A LONG BREAK OR NAP.** At this time there is a natural break in the marathon. Rather than waiting outside for a few objects to rise, you might as well rest for an hour-and-a-half or two while you wait for a larger number to rise sufficiently above the horizon. You may even want to try to take a nap in the warming shed. Make sure however you have someone to wake you at 3 or 3:30. You don't want to oversleep and miss the end.
- 9. GO AT A LEISURELY PACE DOWN THE STRETCH:** You will have a couple of hours to locate the next fifteen objects, so take extra time to view these objects. Enjoy the beauty of the Lagoon and Swan Nebulae. You're almost done.
- 10. HAVE A PLAN FOR THE LAST TOUGH OBJECTS:** Just as you had to hurry at the beginning to catch the early objects before they set, you will have to hurry to catch the last few objects when they rise shortly before dawn. M72, a faint globular cluster, and M73, a faint four-star asterism, are both in late-rising Aquarius and will be difficult to find. Have your route carefully marked on your chart. M30 in Capricornus is not supposed to be viewable at our latitude during mid-March marathons. Since our marathon is later in the month, M30 may be visible but M74 and M77 may not be. If we are delayed to the late April dates, 5 or 6 objects at the beginning of our list may not be visible.
- 11. PRACTICE AHEAD OF THE TIME:** If you have the time and the weather permits, you might want to try a dry run on the tough twilight objects and the Virgo Cluster. Practice might make the difference on whether or not you view all those objects during the marathon. I won't be so presumptuous to suggest that you do a dry run on the early morning objects. Even I won't go out to Jubilee at 4:30 a.m. to do that.
- 12. HAVE FUN:** Last and most important, have fun. You don't have to view them all. The competition is friendly. Messier Marathons, while a challenge, are designed to improve your viewing skills rather than being an end in themselves. Finally, if you do come after sunset, don't forget to turn on your parking lights and turn off your headlights when you drive up the hill.