

Aurora Borealis

Contributed by Daniel A. Bergamini
Sunday, 11 September 2005
Last Updated Thursday, 23 October 2008

If you have never experienced the Aurora Borealis/Northern Lights you should look north tonight. Experts say there was an X17-class monster-flare on Sept. 7th. Want to know if you can see it or how strong it is. Read on to see my long personal account of what we experienced last night, it was amazing!

Pamela Gay, a PhD Astronomer high school friend of recent slacker astronomy.com fame brought a group of MIT ESP program managers (who are MIT students) up for a retreat this weekend. We had talked earlier in the weekend about the recent solar flare and how there were reports from years ago about witnessing the Aurora Borealis this "far" south. spaceweather.com is a great resource for this kind of information.

It was an all around fantastic weekend unlike none I've ever experienced. The kids are a great group, played a bunch (mostly on the trampoline - what a big hit) and focused a great deal on their agenda and I must say hammered out some great ideas for their program. Around 10pm or so we finished sky gazing outside everyone moved in to run through some more agenda items because it was getting pretty chilly. Before they went in some of them were talking about how bright the north-west skyline was - usually just light pollution from Canaan.

Kyle and I hung outside with our cigars around the camp fire when I noticed the sky getting brighter up over Mt. Cardigan. I would like to just mention here that most of the times I mention are based on my recollection; I really wasn't watching the clock from this point forward. Around 10:30pm, out of nowhere a vertical spike of light shot up, then another and I had a sneaky feeling I had gotten my wish. I ran inside and calmly said, "Hey Pam can you do me a favor and confirm that really is the Aurora Borealis outside, I can't be sure." The room erupted and everyone threw warm clothes on and we all ran outside.

It was already more brilliant than when I left and the whole northern sky was flowing, flashing, changing color subtly it was great but died down in under an hour or so. I remember being amazed and in awe but the details are kind of a blur now because of what happened next. After it died down to almost nothing everyone but Kyle and I went inside, I wasn't going to risk missing another - possibly more spectacular - performance. It came on and off but nothing as good as we had seen before. I think it was around 12:30am Kyle bailed and hit the sack.

It must have been 1am or so when a band of light came across the sky, then another easily 3 or 4 times brighter than before. I ran upstairs to grab the camera to see if I could get anything on film. I said in a medium volume voice "anyone who's up and wants to see something more beautiful than before should come outside - it's back". Only one person - Mike I think his name was - took me up on the offer.

Like before, by the time we made it outside it was already noticeably better than it was when I left. We watched it increase in intensity for a few minutes and I said, "I think this is something we should really make an effort to wake people up for and let them decide if they want to miss this themselves". We agreed and headed inside and turned on the light and made a reasonable attempt to wake anyone who was a light sleeper. The president of the group, another Mike who was also an astronomy major was the only one who didn't grunt and want to go back to sleep. So we headed down and watched in amazement.

This is where I'm not sure I'll be able to put into words what we witnessed next. Over the course of the next hour or so the entire northern sky to at least straight over head started to dance with light. The best way I can think to explain it is like when they take those day long movies of clouds and then compress it for playback in 10 seconds. It was very much like that but with multiple colored clouds that disappear in one place and reappear in another. I'm talking the entire northern sky! The vertical spikes still appeared but were pale in comparison to the light show.

The show went on with varying intensity until probably 3:30am, which I think is when Mike bailed on me to watch from inside for a little while before going to bed. It had been chilly most of the night, but now it was downright cold out. I doubt it hit freezing, but it sure felt like it had. weatherunderground.com says the night (morning) low dropped below 40 degrees F around this time. It was still visible and active at around 4:30am when I decided I needed to get some sleep and my feet were ready to freeze off. Wow!

This was really something else, possibly a once in a lifetime kind of experience – but I sure hope it's not. I'm going to stick around NH tonight and see if it will happen again – I've been reading it's quite likely. I can only hope it will be even a fraction as beautiful again, totally worth changing my schedule for. Anyone who wants to come keep me company, give me a call or drop me a line. Hopefully you won't be disappointed, but I can't promise anything but a place to stay and some conversation.

Another first this weekend, which would otherwise have been the exciting news for the weekend, I ran the dishwasher without the generator running. Batteries were pretty high, charging from panels and a number of people had taken showers last night and this morning. We also had heaver than normal flushing with a dozen people in the house. I think

the lowest I saw the batteries drop down to was about 24.5V, which is maybe 1/3 charge and it's already mostly recovered. I'm not going to have to run the generator at all this weekend.