

'Time-travelling' Tasmanian astrophotographer shares his tips for 'addictive' hobby

By Aneeta Bhole

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PHOTO: A backyard image of the Trifid Nebula, just 5,000 light years away. (Supplied: Richard Higby)

Award-winning astrophotographer Richard Higby travels back in time from his backyard in southern Tasmania.

While Mr Higby is not physically moving through the space-time continuum, his images from deep space are.

Mr Higby, who has been taking photographs of the night sky for more than 60 years, said his telescope could serve as "somewhat of a time machine", that allowed astrophotographers to see into the past.

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"It takes 35 million years for those photons of light to reach Earth," he explained.

"When you look at the image you've collected ... it's just amazing. You must be aware that once you get into astrophotography it becomes addictive."



PHOTO: Astrophotographer Richard Higby at home in southern Tasmania. (Supplied: Richard Higby)

The 72-year-old from Opossum Bay south of Hobart said he and a group of avid photographers were the driving force behind starting a new club dedicated to the art.

"I belong to the southern Hobart chapter of the Astronomical Society of Tasmania, and we're thinking of starting up a separate astro-imaging section later this month," he said.

"With any hobby, interacting with other people with the same interest is always fun ... Also, it's great to pass on that knowledge to other people."

From the age of eight, Mr Higby has been a keen observer of the night sky.



GIF: The full moon, filmed by Mr Higby

"Many years ago, my parents bought me a small reflecting telescope, and after playing with that I was hooked," he said.

"I then connected a box brownie camera to the telescope, and tried to take my first image."

Astrophotographers have faced many problems with film technologies.

"With film cameras, the problem was a factor called reciprocity, and this is where the longer the exposure on the film, the more "noise" you would get in the image, to the degree that it would become very blurred," he said.

"The only way to overcome that is to make the film more sensitive, so we would freeze the camera with dry ice.

"So the advent of digital photography has made astrophotography a lot easier."



PHOTO: Mr Higby snapped the Swan Nebula, a massive star-forming region spanning 15 light years across, from his backyard. (Supplied: Richard Higby)

No need for the Hubble — a tripod and camera will do

For people hoping to become involved, Mr Higby said passion for the art and a nominal fee of \$500 would help to get someone started.

"A basic camera, tripod and a DSLR camera with a 135mm lens would help take very reasonable images of the dark night sky, and objects in the Milky Way," he said.

"Most people think it's really hard to take a nice picture — and you need the Hubble Telescope — but you don't."



PHOTO: What Mr Higby calls his "lucky shot"; Comet Lulin C/2007 which will return in a million years.
(Supplied: Richard Higby)

Some images Mr Higby has taken from his backyard include the Lucky Shot, an image of a comet soaring through space that won him an honourable mention at the prestigious David Malin Awards, named after the world-renowned astrophotographer.

"It was also picked up by the Royal Observatory in England, who used it quite extensively," he said.

Other notable images include the Southern Pinwheel Galaxy, Trifid Nebula, Swan Nebula and the full moon.

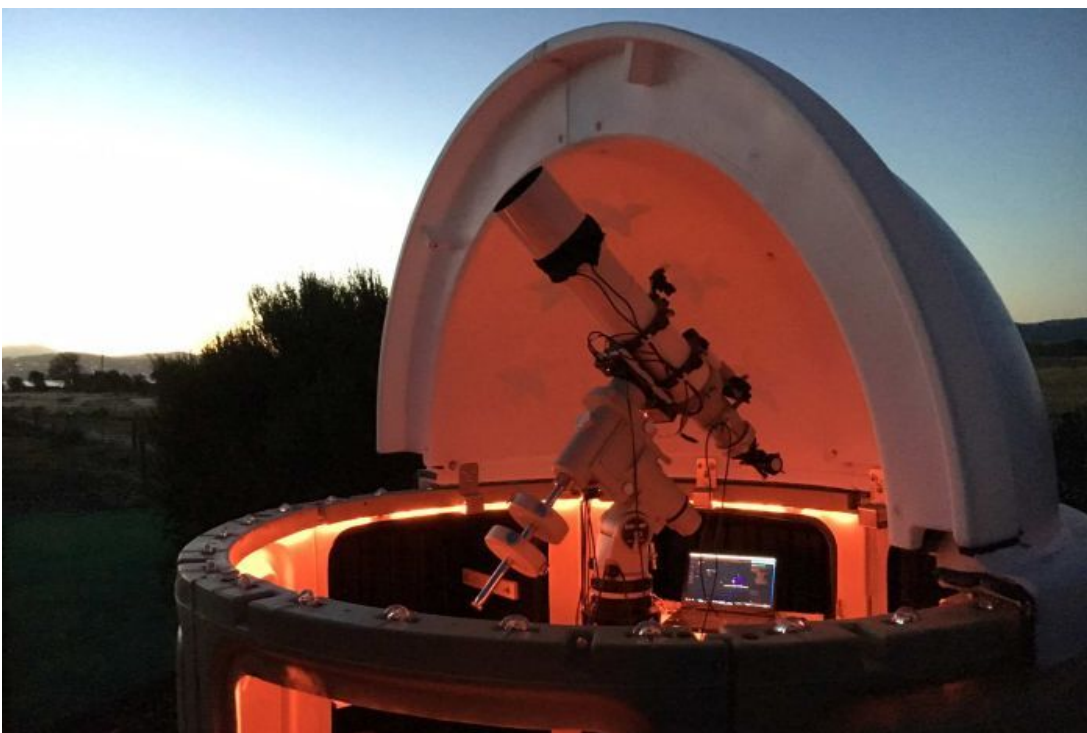


PHOTO: Richard Higby's setup in his backyard in southern Tasmania. (Supplied: Richard Higby)

"The first target astrophotographers go for is the Moon, and you naturally progress to star clusters, nebula and galaxies."

Mr Higby said watching the starry sky would never "get old".

"Given that in the not too distant future we'll be travelling off-world, I think it's just a fascinating hobby to get into and to wonder where we might be in 50 or 100 years' time."



PHOTO: The Southern Pinwheel Galaxy M83 was discovered in 1752 and lies 15 million light years away.
(Supplied: Richard Higby)

Topics: astronomy-space, photography, community-and-society, opossum-bay-7023, north-sydney-2060

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