NCRAL Convention News and Trip Report

By Chris Kardos

As many of you are probably aware, the CAA decided in our June 2024 Business Meeting that we will host the 2026 Convention for the North Central Region of the Astronomical League (NCRAL). Although CAA has hosted the NCRAL annual convention twice in the past, it has been a while – 1999 and 2009. Hosting the convention is a significant undertaking and we have already had a small committee (Tom Weber, Laura Halladay, Kate Poeltler, and yours truly) very active in the initial planning. We will be looking for other members to step up and volunteer too, so stay tuned for more on that.

Some of our long-time members have been involved in various aspects of planning, conducting and attending NCRAL past conventions. In fact, just last year, John Leeson attended the conference in Green Bay, WI to accept the well-deserved NCRAL Newsletter Editor Award on behalf of Greg Frohner and himself.

As of the beginning of 2025, none of our current 2026 planning committee members had ever planned or attended an NCRAL convention. So, to become better prepared for our hosting the 2026 convention, we took two significant actions. First, Tom actively participated on the planning committee for the 2025 convention in Minnetonka, MN (a Minneapolis suburb). And then Tom and I both attended the convention, which was held just a few weeks ago on the weekend of April 25-27. Both of these experiences have given us valuable insights that we believe will help to make our 2026 convention a resounding success.

Tom learned a lot about how the work to plan the convention was organized and assigned to various sub-teams. He also gained valuable insights into crucial topics such as obtaining speakers and sponsors, managing the budget, conducting the planning meetings and the conference itself, coordinating with the hotel venue, and managing communications so that planners and attendees were kept up-to-date on all pertinent details. But I won't bore you with all of those details. Instead, the remainder of this article will focus mainly on our experience attending the event.

Tom picked me up at my home just before noon on Friday (the 25th) and we drove up to the hotel in Minnetonka. It was a nice drive and Tom and I had a great opportunity to get to know each other a bit better, including our musical tastes 😊 . The plan was to arrive at the hotel, check in at both the hotel and the conference registration table and have plenty of time to then drive out to the Minnesota Astronomical Society's (MAS) Eagle Lake Observatory where the Friday evening event was being hosted. Here is a couple of photos of the conference registration table:

Although everything went smoothly and according to schedule, Tom and I were a bit concerned that the cloudy weather we had on the drive up may persist into the evening and interfere with our night at the observatory. But our fears were unfounded – by the time evening rolled around there was nary a cloud in the sky and the viewing was nothing short of fantastic. Even the light pollution was minimal, which I found a bit surprising given that we were only about 35 miles (as the crow flies) from downtown Minneapolis. Here is a photo of the observatory at Eagle Lake, courtesy of the MAS website (https://www.mnastro.org/facilities/eagle-lake/):

Our evening at the observatory started out with a Star B Q hosted by the MAS. Here are a few photos taken at the Star B Q pavilion near the edge of Eagle Lake:

The last is one of several varieties of home-made, astronomy-themed cookies. This particular one depicting the surface of the moon was grape flavored. It was very tasty and a perfect finish to the barbecued meat and sides.

Following the meal, we still had plenty of time before it got dark to tour the observatory facilities, check out a number of their buildings and telescopes, and converse with MAS members and NCRAL attendees. Noha Reda (our past CAA President and current CAA Board Member) was an excellent host and introduced Tom and me to many of the MAS members who were very happy to show off some of their equipment. There were several pieces of equipment of particular interest. Here is a photo of the interior of a domed building known as the Sylvia A. Casby Observatory. Inside is an AstroPhysics 3300GTO mount (a big brother to our own new AstroPhysics 1100GTO mount) with several telescopes attached. The bottom one in the photo is a Lunt Solar Systems scope which we used to view the sun through both a hydrogen-alpha filter and a white-light filter.

And here is a photo of Tom doing exactly that.

Of particular note in both of the preceding photos is a hydraulic system that can be used to raise and lower the entire assembly. In the raised position, it provides the opportunity to see objects in the sky that are closer to the horizon. I don't know its cost or what would be needed to install one for the AstroPhysics mount, but I am guessing we could use something like that to raise our C-14 and Askar scopes higher (in relation to the roll-off walls) and thus get views closer to the horizon as well.

The next photo shows the MAS' Dobsonian-style scope in the foreground and a number of member-owned scopes in the background. The Dob has a 20-inch primary mirror! It is also outfitted with a motorized drive system that gives it go-to capability.

Just before it got dark enough for observing, there were two formal presentations given in a small, but very nice classroom building as shown in the following photo.

The presentations were on The History of the MAS and on the State of Our Astronomy Industry. They were both well-done. The latter included a discussion of the dwindling number of equipment suppliers as well as the potential impacts of tariffs.

Following the presentations, Tom and I hung around long enough to do some viewing through various club and member scopes. And as I mentioned earlier, the sky was exceptionally clear and the viewing was superb. That made up for the fact that it was also quite chilly that night! Once we had enough of the chilly weather, we headed back to the hotel for the night, but it was a very nice night indeed.

The main conference was held on Saturday from 8 am until about 9 pm. Yes, it was a long day! Here is a photo of the conference room at the hotel:

The first item on the morning agenda was the NCRAL Annual Business Meeting at which officers were elected and other business was conducted. But the main attraction of the business meeting was Tom's pitch for the 2026 convention that the CAA will be hosting. Here is a photo of Tom presenting the promotional video produced by Kate Poeltler (with input from the rest of our planning team):

Kate did a fantastic job, and the video was very well received. Although it was pretty much a formality, a vote was then taken confirming that the CAA will host the 2026 convention.

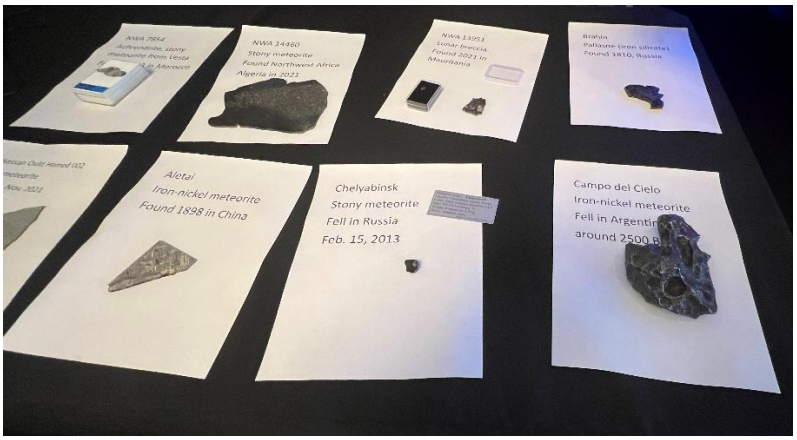
Following the business meeting, there were two formal presentations. Evan Skillman's topic was "Using the Large Binocular Telescope to Measure the Primordial Helium Abundance". Mike Benson then presented "Astrophotography – My Journey".

For lunch, everyone was on their own. Some attendees went out to local establishments or had box lunches they had ordered in advance, but Tom and I, as well as a number of other attendees, had lunch at the hotel's restaurant.

After lunch, there were three presentations. Clem Pryke spoke on "Studying the Beginning of the Universe from the Bottom of the World", John Rummel's topic was "Can the Milky Way Cast a Shadow", and Bob King's presentation was entitled "NASA's Planned NEO Surveyor Hunts Down Killer Asteroids".

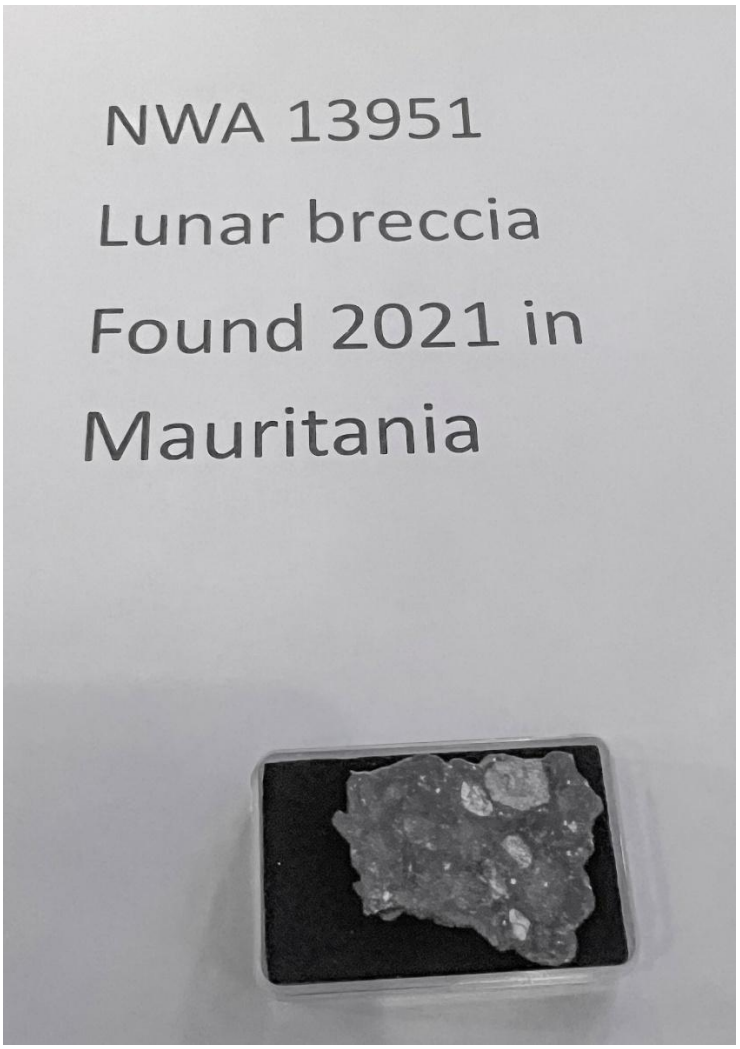
Each of the morning and afternoon presentations were well received and lasted about one hour including time for Q&A. Also, in between presentations, drawings for door prizes were held.

During the afternoon, a number of other activities also took place. One was a showing of meteorite samples as shown in the following photo.

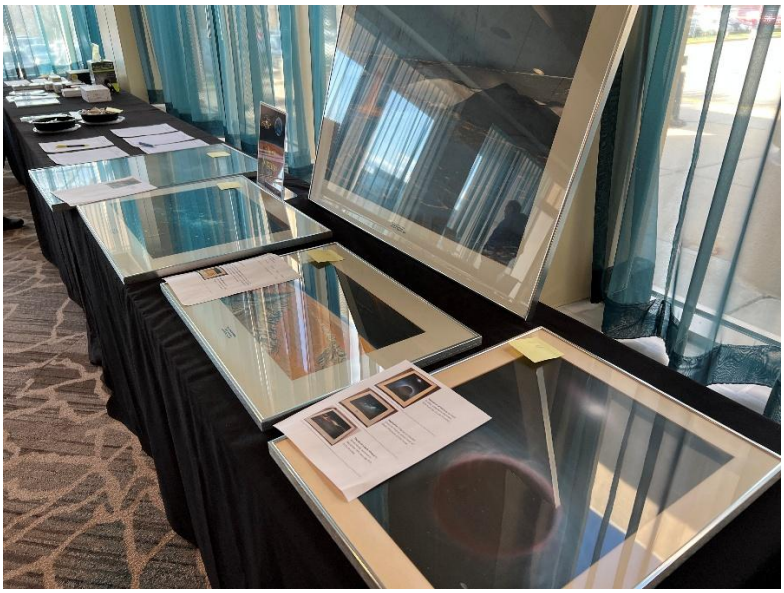


To me, the most interesting one was the one shown in the following photo - a fragment of lunar breccia. With some help from Microsoft CoPilot, I learned that lunar breccia is a type of rock found on the Moon that forms when high-energy processes, such as meteoroid or asteroid impacts, shatter and then fuse together fragments of older rocks and fragmented material. In essence, lunar breccia acts like a time capsule—it carries within it the record of past impact events and the history of the lunar surface over billions of years. Samples of lunar breccia can find their way to earth in the form of meteorites when a substantial impact on the Moon ejects the material towards the earth with enough energy to overcome the Moon's gravitational pull.

Attendees were able to pick up and examine the various meteorite samples. For me, it was pretty cool to know that I was actually holding a piece of the Moon in my hands.



Also in the afternoon, a silent auction was held for a number of original artwork prints used for the covers of Astronomy magazine issues from the 1970's. These were donated to the NCRAL when the Astronomy Magazine office where they were held was permanently closed. Tom turned out to be the winning bidder on two of them. Here is a photo of some of the prints that were auctioned (with apologies for the poor quality due to the reflections).



Another afternoon activity was an astrophotography contest. Meeting attendees were able to submit images in a variety of categories including Deep Sky, Solar System, Rich Field, Wide Field/Nightscape and Art & Sketching and all attendees were able to cast votes for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place in each category as well as for Best in Show". Tom lamented that he didn't enter anything in the Art & Sketching category. He would have won automatically as there were no entries in that category. 😊 There were lots of nice images in the contest, but I believe many of them were not as good as some of the fantastic photos that many of our own CAA members have produced. **So take note, everyone – prepare your best stuff for the photo competition at our convention next year and win one or more of the medals similar to those shown in the following photo:**

After the afternoon sessions concluded, a group photo was taken followed by a social hour with a cash bar. Dinner, which was included as part of the conference fee, was then served in the main meeting room.

Following the meal, Lawrence Rudnick gave the keynote presentation entitled “Game Changers in the Radio Sky”. The evening then wrapped up with an extended awards ceremony. Award were presented for a long list of categories, including a number of observing awards. A drawing was then held for the final “grand prize”, a modest Celestron telescope and mount as shown in the following photo.

The next morning, attendees were able to use discounted tickets to attend the Bell Museum and Planetarium in St. Paul. But Tom and I instead accepted a very gracious invitation for lunch at Noha’s house. Chuck Allen, the Astronomical League President who has presented at the EIOLC, and John Zimitsch, Vice President of the Minnesota Astronomical Society, were also invited and able to join us.

Together we all enjoyed Noha's wonderful cooking and great conversation. Following lunch, Tom and I hit the road to come home. All in all, it was a great weekend and we learned a lot to help us prepare for hosting the convention next year.