Reviews

The practical astronomer's deep-sky companion

by Jess K. Gilmour

Springer–Verlag, 2003. ISBN 1-85233-474-6. Pp xiv + 140, £25.00 (pbk).

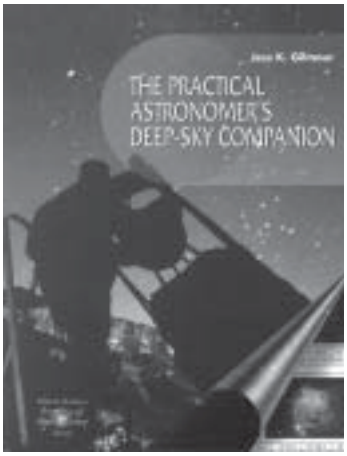
This latest volume in the *Patrick Moore's Practical Astronomy* series is another 'curate's egg' from Springer. Jess K. Gilmour is an experienced astrophotographer from Ontario, Canada and assuming that he is responsible for all the images, a skilled one too. I imagine that he is also a CCD imager, though there is no reference in the text to the instrumentation used, exposures, dates or other such data that would be of interest to the deep sky enthusiast.

After a brief introduction, including a little history and philosophy of the Deep Sky, an explanation of how the book works and a brief section on Field of View (FOV) for photography and CCDs, Gilmour launches into the main body of the book that shows images of the best deep sky objects in 45 of the constellations viewable from mid-northern latitudes.

There are 841 illustrations, including over 430 images of deep sky objects. These are arranged by constellation in alphabetical order, and most of the best-known northern deep sky objects are here, including the majority of Messier objects other than those in Puppis and Hydra, and the asterisms. (Messier 37 is omitted from the index but its portrait is there within Auriga). Gilmour introduces some less well-known targets too, including many Index Catalogue entries, Barnard's dark nebulae, and several from the Sharpless catalogue of bright nebulae. This was good to see.

The pictures of the deep sky objects hint at Gilmour's talents as an astronomical imager. However, all the pictures are too small at 49×33mm. All are in colour, and mostly excellent, but they would have had so much more impact if double the size – and there was room for this increase, as many pages have large gaps, the small location maps are fairly useless (a good atlas is still to be much preferred) and the tables take up too much space for the material contained. Each table has the objects' co-ordinates, size, magnitude and type, and a very brief description, but space is wasted by repeatedly including the constellation in the data, as it is obvious from the layout of the book where the object is, and also the Field of View data after every object is ludicrous.

Not quite all the images are equally good (e.g. NGC 752 in Andromeda), and many that are potentially impressive lose out by being too small (e.g. NGC 2623 in Cancer). Others, especially some of the planetary nebulae, have been carelessly distorted, presumably by the publishers (note especially NGCs 7662, 6781, and 6826). Some images are misleading; for example both the Hercules globulars are shown, but one is led to believe that Messier 92 is considerably more impressive than Messier 13, and that NGC 3190 in Leo outranks Messiers 65 and 66. The newcomer could be quite baffled.



There are a few other irritations. Messier 99 was nicknamed 'the Pinwheel' by R. H. Allen in the past, but this nickname is almost always used now for M33 or M101. The American constellation pronunciations could grate on this side of the Atlantic (e.g. Cancer being pronounced KAN-surr).

All in all, this could have been so much better if Gilmour's images had taken centre stage at the expense of the little maps, repetitive FOV material and large spaces on so many pages. But its redeeming feature is the inclusion of fresh targets, all in colour, for all to enjoy.

Nick Hewitt

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