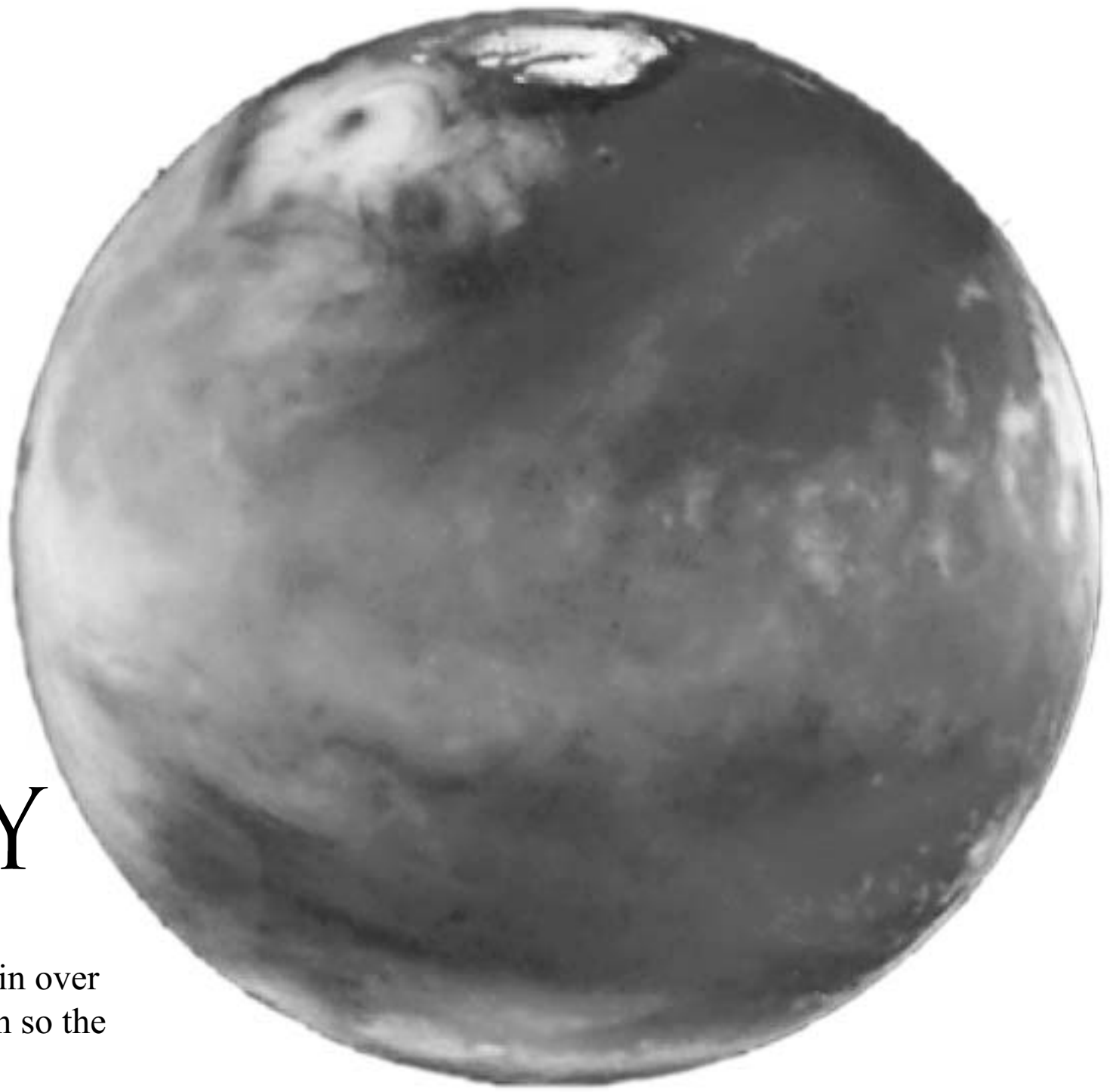


IN FOCUS

A LOOK TO THE SKIES: DARK SKY OBSERVATORY

Special to *The Appalachian*

On Aug. 29, Mars will be at its closest point to Earth in over 60,000 years. ASU's Dark Sky Observatory will open so the community can get a closer look at the Red Planet.

KELLY SEAMAN
Staff Writer

Appalachian State University's Dark Sky Observatory will be open to the public for the first time ever. People from Appalachian State and the community can come see Mars as its closest point to Earth in

more than 60,000 years.

"It's probably the best thing happening in the sky this year," Dr. Dan Caton, professor of astronomy and physics and director of observatories said.

Starting at 9 p.m. on Aug. 29, the doors of the Dark Sky Observatory will open for viewing and close at 4 a.m. on Aug. 30.

The best times to see the planet are between 11 p.m. and 1:30 a.m.

There is no fee for this event, but the Dark Sky Observatory will be accepting donations to help pay for other public programs.

According to Caton, the unique proximity of Mars made opening the doors a necessity. The Dark Sky Observatory has never had a general public night. A visitor's center, which is attached to the main telescope dome is only two-thirds finished, but will still be

open.

While observing on a clear night, astronomers will make images of the planet with a scientific digital camera called a CCD, then use software to measure the brightness.

Caton explained why Mars is different from the other planets.

"Mars is interesting because it is the only planet we can see from Earth," Caton said. "Mars has polar ice caps, ice storms, and it has always been a great public interest since astronomers back in the 1800s thought they saw canals."

While waiting for Mars to come into range, the telescope will be focused on other celestial objects such as stars and galaxies.

The public will be viewing the red planet through a 32-inch telescope, along with smaller telescopes.

Some Appalachian students are looking forward to this event.

"It's going to be great to see Mars up close and personal in the

proximity that it is in," Alexander G. Collins, a rising sophomore and banking and finance major, said. "I know that we have spent lots of money on equipment on other technical devices to basically scan the surface of Mars, although it has met with success and failure.

"I remember the whole issue about seeing ice caps and that Mars is possibly habitable. Since water is the basic necessity for life, it provides us reason to explore Mars further so that we can start cultivating a new civilization."

"It's simply amazing to see another planet from Earth through a telescope," A. Karl Wagner, an undeclared sophomore said. "I am very appreciative that our school is having this open house and allowing the public to utilize the school's resources on such a rare event."

Others are interested in the mystery of the red planet.

"I know it is referred to as the Earth's sister planet," Jim Warren, evening manager for Plemmons Student Union said. "It's been kind of looked on

with mystery and a question of life on Mars. It's interesting to see what is really there. I am looking forward to being able to see it through equipment rather than the naked eye."

The President of the Women in Physics and Astronomy Club will also be waiting for Mars to come into range.

"Honestly, I have never been up to the observatory," said Marissa J. Detschel, President of Women in Physics and Astronomy Club. "I am really excited, being able to see Mars—it hasn't been this close in 60,000 years. If it's a really good night, you will probably see polar icecaps."

Detschel said she has two telescopes of her own and has been watching Mars on her porch as it approaches.

"I plan to pursue a career in planetary science," Detschel said.

"Mars has always been a main interest—observing it is definitely a hobby. Actually getting my hands on meteorites from Mars is what I want to do."

APPALACHIAN'S DARK SKY OBSERVATORY

WHAT

ASU's observational research facility will open to the public for the upcoming view of Mars at its closest proximity to the Earth in 60,000 years.

WHERE

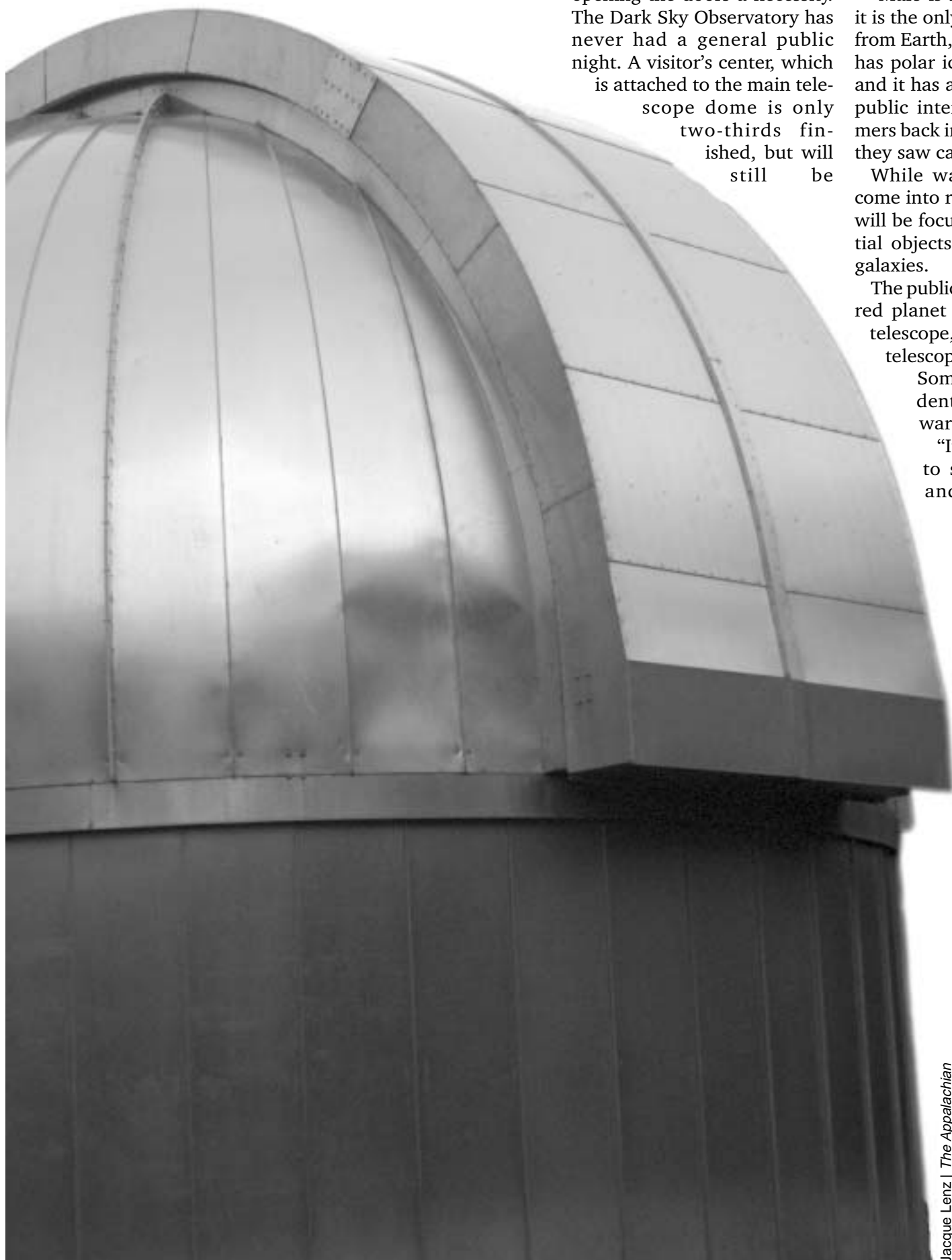
Go north 7 miles on the Blue Ridge Parkway from Deep Gap to a gravel road marked Philips Gap Road. Turn right. Go approximately a mile and a half. The observatory is on the left.

WHEN

Open to the public
Aug. 29, 9 p.m. - Aug. 30, 4 a.m.
Best viewing of Mars between
11 p.m. and 1:30 a.m.

ALSO

- Facilities aren't heated. Dress appropriately.
- There is minimal outdoor lighting. Bring a flashlight.
- Smoking and pets are prohibited.

Jacque Lenz | *The Appalachian*