

MicroObservatory catches comet ISON

November 18 2013



This animation combines two photos of Comet ISON taken about a half hour apart on the morning of Nov. 9. At the time, ISON was traveling through the solar system at a speed of about 120,000 miles per hour. ISON will make a close approach to the sun on Nov. 28, and might become spectacularly bright in the days immediately following perihelion. Credit: B. Mellin/MicroObservatory

Hopes are high for Comet ISON, which has the potential to become the most spectacular comet seen in years. ISON is speeding through the

inner solar system at about 120,000 miles per hour, on its way to a close approach to the Sun on November 28th. Assuming it survives its close encounter, it could become easily visible to the unaided eye in dawn skies.

Comet ISON recently brightened and is currently visible with telescopes or binoculars in the constellation Virgo. Today the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (CfA) is releasing new images of ISON obtained with the MicroObservatory robotic telescope system.

The animated gif combines two separate 60-second exposures of ISON and shows the comet moving against a background of stars. The comet displays a fuzzy round coma and a tail extending to upper right beyond the edge of the frame.

These photos were taken on the morning of Saturday, November 9 by retired teacher Bruce Mellin using MicroObservatory's "Donald" telescope in Arizona. The 650 by 500 pixel images show an area of the sky 0.9 by 0.7 degrees in size. (For comparison, the Full Moon is half a degree across.)

MicroObservatory is a network of automated telescopes, developed by CfA scientists and educators, that can be controlled over the Internet. They were designed to enable students and teachers nationwide to investigate the wonders of the deep sky from their classrooms or after-school centers.



This photograph shows two of the five automated telescopes that form the MicroObservatory network. MicroObservatory lets students and teachers control a telescope from their own computer to take images of the night sky. Credit: Daniel Brocius (CfA)

Its five telescopes are named for prominent astronomers through history: Annie Jump Cannon, Benjamin Banneker, Cecelia Payne-Gaposhkin, Donald Menzel, and Edward Pickering.

More information: Students and teachers wanting to use the MicroObservatory telescopes can sign up online at mo-www.cfa.harvard.edu/OWN/index.html.

Provided by Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics

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