

Discovery News > Space News > Meteors, Twitter and an Astrobunker

METEORS, TWITTER AND AN ASTROBUNKER

IM Interview: MeteorWatch has become a social media sensation. Discovery News asks MeteorWatch coordinator Adrian West why he thinks its become so popular.

By Ian O'Neill | Wed Dec 09, 2009 10:26 AM ET

Adrian West is a British amateur astronomer and member of Newbury Astronomical Society. There's nothing out of the ordinary with that. However, Adrian has boosted the scope of not only Newbury AS to a huge online following, he boosted the international promotion of astronomy when he started the social media phenomenon known as "MeteorWatch."

The idea is simple: You open a Twitter account, you follow @NewburyAS and you look up. If you participated in MoonWatch in October, or the previous MeteorWatch in August, you'll know the drill; every MeteorWatch "tweet" you send you just need to include "#MeteorWatch" in the text. Then the fun begins!

This all sounds great, but why does Adrian think astronomy and social media seem to blend so well? Discovery News caught up with Adrian to find out more about the next MeteorWatch, starting on Dec. 12 when the Geminid meteor shower is set to make a spectacular return.

Ian O'Neill: Sorry I'm a bit late!

Adrian West says: Hi mate, I was so busy time flew by.

I'm ready when you are.

Ian O'Neill: Me too – it's been a crazy one. All this Virgin Galactic stuff has had us buzzing today.

Okay, so when does the next big Twitter event begin? #MeteorWatch must be close by now.

Adrian West says: It starts on the 12th at 7.30pm and continues through to the 14th. The Geminids maximum is a long 24 hours over the 13th and 14th.

Ian O'Neill: Great! I can't wait for this one; I missed the last #MeteorWatch as I was in NYC. Unfortunately, it looks like LA will be under cloud for the next week! I hope I get a chance to see some of the Geminids.

What's the weather supposed to be like where you are?

Adrian West says: The BBC forecast reckons the wet weather we've been having is going to clear towards the end of the week and continue through the weekend. Fingers crossed.

We need it to get colder to for good seeing and to keep the clouds away.

Ian O'Neill: I'll keep my fingers crossed for you. It wouldn't be right if you can't see any meteors!

So will your HQ still be in the Newbury Astronomical Society shed? Where is that anyway?

Adrian West says: Yes it will be in the shed or "Astrobunker" which is in a little village in West Berkshire just off the M4 Motorway. Right smack in the middle between London and Bristol.

The Village is called Great Shefford.

Ian O'Neill: I'll so have to pop down when I'm in Bristol next, your Astrobunker is becoming legendary!

So getting to #MeteorWatch, why do you think it's become so popular? I know I was totally fascinated with the last #MeteorWatch and then #MoonWatch was a ton of fun too.



Very simple instructions. This is the only thing you need to do for MeteorWatch. Oh yes, and you'll need a Twitter account.
Newbury AS/Adrian West

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It's as if you've planted a small acorn and now a massive social media oak has grown!

Adrian West says: The reason it is so popular is that you don't need any specialist kit or knowledge to see meteors and they are quite inspiring when you see one. A lot of people don't realize (outside of astronomy) that they exist and when they see one or hear that they can go out and hunt for them, they get very excited.

I think the popularity of meteors is down to the fact that they are in "real time" and spectacular, they are a real crowd puller and an inspiration to a lot of people. Anyone can go out and look for them.

Ian O'Neill: I think it's a wonderful way to promote astronomy, for professionals and amateurs alike... and the best thing is that it's an international affair.... with you right in the center of it all.

Adrian West says: #MeteorWatch helps people get a sense of what to look for and help is always available via Twitter. The information generated in the event by all participating is a wealth of knowledge.

Yes, It's great to be able to hand over the reigns when the sun comes up here to the US and other countries. The sky is part of all of us and it is great that we can get people from all over the world joining in and in a lot of cases seeing things they had never seen before.

Ian O'Neill: It's awesome. And I can tell you from my perspective (over here on the other side of the planet), that you've had a profound effect on the US public. As the popularity of Twitter has grown, it's as if the popularity of this new form of social media astronomy has grown, too.

Adrian West says: Social media has enabled people to engage in astronomy in a way that has never been done before. Traditionally, astronomy has been a stuffy and elite subject usually practiced by hobbyists or nerds. In the UK it feels very 19th century with an elite core supplying the information.

Twitter and Facebook have broken down all the barriers and made astronomy accessible to all. People can learn and get involved in ways which best suit them rather than going to a club or getting out a book (both good, of course), but they can now do it in a modern exciting and easy way.

Ian O'Neill: Well, coming from a non-astronomer (I can't tell you what the stars look like, but I can tell you how they work!), I can tell you that you've made me "look up" an awful lot more than I used to. It's great to know I don't need a telescope to do astronomy.

Adrian West says: You will find that most of the senior or well known astronomers are on Twitter and it's great that you can just ask them a question and in most cases you get an answer straight away. It feels as if everyone is on an equal playing field giving and exchanging information and knowledge.

Ian O'Neill: That's very true. It's great that just by adding the "hashtag" #MeteorWatch to tweets means you have access to an entire planet of participating astronomers.

Adrian West says: That's our main aim to get as many people to look up and enjoy the wonders of the night sky as possible. The sky is for everyone, not just for astronomers.

Ian O'Neill: Okay, so on to the Geminids. What are they? And are they expected to be any more frequent this year?

Adrian West says: The Geminids are a yearly Meteor shower which occurs in mid December. They are probably the most reliable shower of the year with up to 100+ meteors (shooting stars) visible per hour dependant on conditions and dark skies.

The meteors themselves are slower and brighter than most other showers sometimes with brightly colored tails and some large ones turn into fireballs. Another difference is they – unlike other meteor showers – don't originate from the debris of a comet. The Geminids originate from an extinct comet or asteroid.

The fragments that burn up in the atmosphere (which create the shooting stars through friction with the atmosphere) are very rocky causing them to burn very bright. The shower radiant (the part of the sky they originate from) is in the constellation Gemini, hence the name "Geminids."

Ian O'Neill: No way! I assumed they were from a known comet! Ha, you learn something new every day. Well, I'll certainly be outside looking at the sky from December 12th! And I'll be tweeting the event too.

Will there be a radio broadcast this time too? The #Moonwatch Astronomy.fm coverage was lots of fun!

Adrian West says: Yes there will be a broadcast by Astronomy FM, they are doing a show on the 12th and the 13th. You will have to be one of the guests.

Ian O'Neill: Wonderful, that would be awesome! I enjoyed it last time, but I'll have to do some reading about meteors before I go on air...

I think it's fast approaching 4am in the UK for you, so I'll let you get some sleep! (Do you sleep??)

But before I go, I just wanted to congratulate you on the #MeteorWatch teaser trailer... you out did yourself this time! Wow. I felt very emotional by the end! Great job. I'll have a blog post online about that before I post this interview. Great video/graphics/animation skills you have there!

Adrian West says: The great thing about this MeteorWatch is that it is going to be the finale to the International Year of Astronomy, probably the last event. So we want to get as many people around the world looking up and seeing meteors.

It would be great to break the record of numbers of people of the last one we did for the Perseids in August. We trended for over a day and knocked Miley Cyrus off the number one spot. Over 10,000 tweets were recorded in one evening up until the method of recording them broke. Our blog received 25,000 hits. That's a

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tall order for this one but we hope we can do it better this time.

Ian O'Neill: Ha! Well, Miley deserved to be booted from the #1 spot.

Adrian West says: Cheers mate I enjoyed doing it and it's great that so many people have been watching and enjoying it.

Ian O'Neill: You are firmly putting your astronomical organization on the map. [I know Richard Fleet](#) [Chairman of Newbury AS] is highly impressed with the outstanding work you are doing.

Adrian West says: Making trailers and things helps people get interested and look up from what they usually do and hopefully look up at the sky.

Ian O'Neill: I'll be doing my bit for #MeteorWatch from my corner of California, and [I know the #SpaceTweeps](#) will all be working overtime during the Geminids.

Adrian West says: Its something I enjoy and am very passionate about. I love getting people enthused about the sky. That's probably why I now have the lifestyle of a vampire

Yes, the #SpaceTweeps are great!

It's great that you can join in too, you are quite the star on Twitter.

Ian O'Neill: Awesome. Well keep it up; if there was ever a good time for such an innovative use of social media, this would be it. Engaging the public in astronomy is so important and the Astrobunker is fast becoming the international node for astro-tweeps.

Adrian West says: Yeah, and I must fix the leaky roof.

Ian O'Neill: Let's hope the weather is clear too! For both of us!

Adrian West says: Definitely that is a must. We had poor weather for the last one so if it's clear this time it will be quite a show.

Ian O'Neill: Thanks so much Adrian for chatting with me.

Adrian West says: Thanks Ian, it's been a pleasure.

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