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Preface

Amateur astronomy can be a surprisingly aggressive field. Newcomers to the hobby will often find their computerized telescopes derided as little more than children's toys, equipped with digital crutches for people too lazy to learn the sky the *traditional* way. Apparently, looking at the Moon from your front porch isn't *serious* astronomy, and what you should be doing is driving three hundred miles out into the countryside and working your way through a catalog of magnitude-fifteen galaxies. Otherwise reasonable people will insist that if you look at the faint fuzzy ball *properly*, you can't help but see the chains of stars running through that globular cluster breathtakingly like a squadron of herring gulls following a fishing trawler. Maybe, maybe not, but with all the hoopla over apochromatic refractors and wide-angle eyepieces, the star charts down to thirtieth magnitude and CCD cameras that cost more than small motor cars, some people have forgotten that amateur astronomers look at the night sky not to do science but *simply for the fun of it*. Moreover, one of the best tools for enhancing that fun is probably sitting somewhere in your house right now: the home computer.

However, beyond CCD astrophotography, astronomy books and magazines tend to ignore this particular adjunct to the hobby. This book is my attempt to rectify this, to put as many ideas and tips into one volume as possible, from webcam astrophotography to writing equipment reviews for astronomy web sites. One of my main aims throughout this book has been to keep everything as accessible as possible, the only common denominator being a telescope and a home computer. Even a go-to telescope, while useful, isn't a prerequisite. This isn't a computer manual either, and while there are tips on using computers more efficiently where it relates to amateur astronomy, there isn't anything on how to install programs or write HTML code. Finally, this isn't a book just for users of any one particular kind of computer; in virtually all cases the projects described in this book can be accomplished equally well with Windows, Macintosh and Linux. There's no one best operating system any more than there is a perfect telescope design.

Many people have contributed freely of their time and experience and, without them, writing this book would have been impossible. Particular thanks goes to the software developers who have shared their programs with me and explained something of the philosophy behind their projects. Chief among these are Milton Aupperle (Outcast Software), Elwood Downey (Clear Sky Institute), Jason Harris (KStars), Stephen Hutson (American Dream Partnership), Steve McDonald (Silicon Spaceships), Paul Rodman (Ilanga Software) and Darryl Robertson (Microprojects). Celestron, IBM, Logitech, Meade, Tele Vue and Vixen have been generous with their time and resources, and their help in supplying images in

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Neale Monks
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