

tracking asteroids, and the data we provide is used by the government.

"Our data is fed to databases like the Minor Planet Center, and they keep data on asteroid positions and photometry, which is the measurement of the intensity of light. That data is available to both government and private researchers, so it's pretty neat to feel like you're doing something that's useful and not just staring up at the sky."

Martinez said that he hasn't looked through the eyepiece of a telescope in over two years, because he says that all the professional and serious amateur telescopes are computerized and that to operate a telescope today for research purposes, one needs computer software.

"In that way, you can also record the data," he said, "otherwise, no one can use it. For example, I've programmed the telescope to lock onto and follow a star called Adhafera, located in the western sky. Once locked on, the computer compensates for the rotation of the earth, thus keeping the star centered throughout the night.

"What this does then is to allow the asteroids to become visible, because they are moving much faster than the star and are much closer to earth in comparison, and their movements allow us to find and identify them.

"There are millions of rocks out there that we don't know anything about and that includes the near-earth asteroids, which get pretty close to earth once in a while. Recently, we had a couple that crossed between the moon and earth, and that's really close. Of those we have cataloged, what we do is we pick out one that's bright enough for the telescope to pick up, which for my 11-inch telescope is about 15 magnitude, and that depends on the size and reflectivity of the asteroid.

"The equipment that most amateurs have today is better than what professionals had 25 years ago. For example, the asteroid that I have been working on recently is called 1937 Locarno, as named by the International Astronomy Union, and if I want to find this asteroid, all I have to do is hit "find" and the computer finds that asteroid and tells me exactly where that asteroid is located at this time of year and this time of night at my present location, and it will align the telescope to place that asteroid at or near the center of my field of view."

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