

# Testing 'Earth Centered Universe'

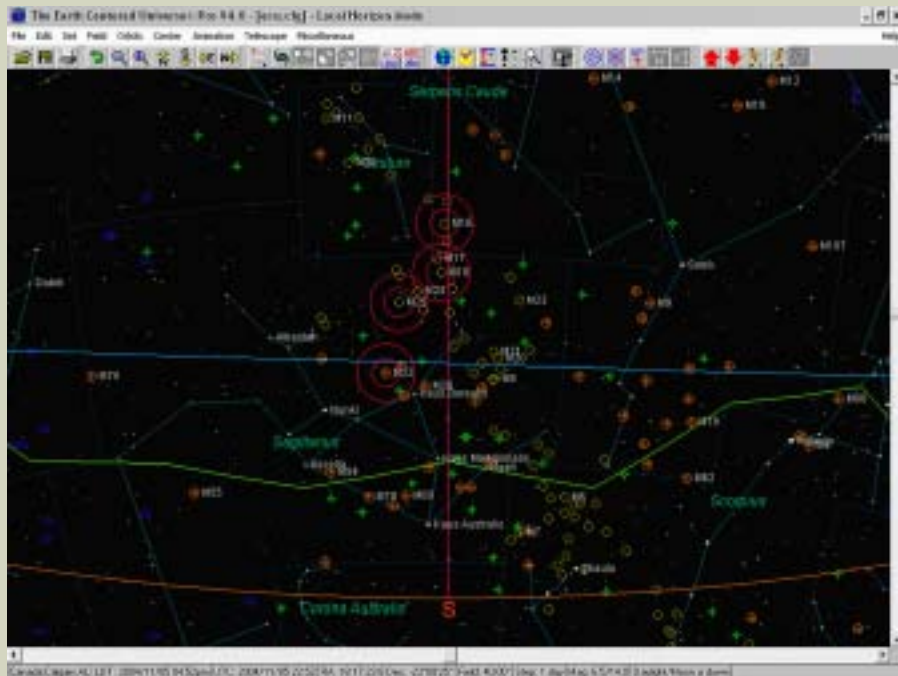
*The latest version of this popular astronomy software adds still more power while maintaining its fast speed and bargain price*

by Alan Dyer

CANADIANS WRITE GREAT ASTRONOMY software. Starry Night and Desktop Universe come to mind as respected entries on the market. For more than a decade, a program created by David Lane and marketed through his company Nova Astronomics has developed a loyal following. Earth Centered Universe has matured over the years into one of the best astronomy programs available. The latest version, 4.0 Pro, improves upon an already fine product. It is available for Windows only but is compatible with Windows versions as old as 3.1.

ECU, as its fans call it, is what I refer to as a star-atlas program. This class of software makes no effort to simulate twilight glows or provide realistic horizons or sky views. Instead, ECU excels at providing a digital version of a detailed printed star atlas, with the horizon represented by merely a line. Planets are accurately plotted, but just as dots. A great new feature allows one-click updating of comet and asteroid orbits over the Internet.

ECU's forte is its extensive stellar and deep-sky databases. Stars can be displayed down to an amazing magnitude 19, using the optional U.S. Naval Observatory USNO-A2 database (that's 500 million stars!). Deep-sky enthusiasts will appreciate the



## THE 'EARTH CENTERED' SKY

ECU 4.0 Pro plots the horizon as a line (the orange line here), with the option of adding a user-defined horizon (the wavy green line) to represent your local obstructions. Object symbols are fixed, but colours and fonts can be customized in screen displays and in charts printed in colour. Buttons along the toolbar at top provide quick control of major features. Indicators for finderscope fields, camera frames or, as here, Telrad or QuikFinder reticles can be plotted for creating custom charts for star-hopping or photo framing.



## TELESCOPE CONNECTION

ECU can connect to a wide range of GoTo telescopes, either directly, through ECU's native drivers, or via the industry-standard ASCOM setup panel now supplied with ECU. A user-definable field of view (the white circle) shows the current field of the telescope. The sky plot can be set to slew automatically with the telescope or to stay put as the telescope moves around. One night-vision mode (shown here) reddens all panels but keeps the sky black with coloured objects for easier viewing. White-on-black and all-red modes are also available.

extensive catalogues of tens of thousands of targets. Obscure Terzan globulars, Abell planetaries, PGC galaxies—they're all here, either as standard features or in supplementary files that can be downloaded at no charge.

Objects can be filtered by type and magnitude and labelled not only with their catalogue number but also with their magnitude, size and classification and, in the case of double stars, their separation. I particularly like using ECU when surveying double stars, as it plots them with large, easy-to-see symbols, making doubles stand out clearly from other stars. A new Auto-Place command prevents object labels from colliding, which is useful when exploring crowded galaxy fields. A welcome future improvement would be plotting large nebulas by actual shape, not just as large symbols, and including Milky Way outlines and the option for an opaque horizon.

Of the many astronomy programs on the market, ECU is one of my favourites for use in the field controlling a GoTo telescope where a star-atlas program is ideal. ECU's scope-control panels are simple to use, its night-vision dim modes are easy on the eyes, and it is possible to type

observing notes directly into ECU. The program provides software drivers for all the popular models of GoTo scopes and digital setting circles yet costs far less than most programs that have telescope-connection capabilities.

At \$60 (U.S.)—about \$80 (Cdn.)—ECU Pro is a bargain in the software world, with databases that compete with high-end star-atlas programs selling for \$200 to \$300 (Cdn.). What's more, ECU is lightning-fast (no sluggish screen redraws, as with some hefty programs) and runs well on slower machines, making it a good choice for that old laptop you want to relegate to field use at the telescope.

If you're looking for a simpler program, Nova Astronomics offers ECU Lite, available only via download. The Lite version includes about 2,000 deep-sky objects and displays stars to magnitude 8.5, but it cannot connect to a telescope.

If you are still unsure whether ECU is for you, download a 30-day trial version at the Nova Astronomics website ([www.nova-astro.com](http://www.nova-astro.com)) along with a complete user's manual in PDF format. The full version of ECU Pro can be ordered online from Nova Astronomics or Kendrick

Astro Instruments ([www.kendrick-ai.com](http://www.kendrick-ai.com)). The Nova site also contains a link to Michael Cook's set of supplementary databases for ECU, which includes select lists such as the Finest NGC Objects, the Herschel 400, Hickson Galaxy Groups, Carbon Stars and many more. The availability of these specialized files makes it possible to work easily through a list by displaying only those objects. Pity they don't come with symbols that indicate the type of object (all are classed as "Other").

In all, I recommend Earth Centered Universe, especially for use at the telescope. The program is easy for beginners to operate yet powerful enough to please die-hard observers. Even if you use other programs, ECU's low cost and unique features make it a worthwhile addition to any backyard astronomer's computer. ■

#### **Earth Centered Universe v4.0**

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**ECU Pro: \$59.95 (U.S.)**  
**ECU Lite: \$19.95 (U.S.)**