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"SEDS Messier Database (Messier Catalog)" Review

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Reference Reviews

Title: SEDS Messier Database (Messier Catalog)

Publisher Name: Students for the Exploration and Development of Space (SEDS)

Publisher Location: Cambridge, Massachusetts USA

Publication Year: Last visit, June 20, 2005

Internet URL: http://www.seds.org/messier/

Price: Gratis

Reviewer: Skye Hardesty, Science Liaison/Reference Librarian, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA USA

The SEDS Messier Database provides "a complete guide to the 110 objects recognized as the standard Messier catalog" (introduction on web site). The Messier catalog is a collection of objects including nebulae, star clusters, and galaxies assembled by astronomer Charles Messier from 1758 – 1782. The site is a collection of articles about each object in the catalog rich with hyperlinks to not only the catalog itself but to additional articles about the object's discovery, historical observations, technical information, images, and more. Each article contains linked references to journal articles, additional internet resources and images, and a book list for further reading.

Articles can be accessed in several ways. There is a main index that lists the objects in the Messier catalog order (it can be viewed with images or without) and another index of objects by type: nebulae, clusters, and galaxies. At the bottom of the main database page there are more searching options such as by constellation or right ascension. A list of "the hottest stuff" in the database is offered even though no explanation of why the information is hot is provided.

One hesitates to point out flaws in a resource put together by volunteers but the navigation of this site is extraordinarily confusing. There is an icon of 2 large arrows that, when clicked on, takes a visitor immediately into the first object of the catalog but one can't navigate from that article to the next object in the catalog. The index of Messier objects isn't hyperlinked, other options of looking for items aren't offered until you scroll to the bottom of the page. Some content has not been updated in a few years, for example the "Messier Object of the Week" was last updated in 2003. The main problem is the inability to go from object M1 to object M2. To proceed to the next object in the catalog you need to hit the back button on your browser and select the object you want to view next. Once a visitor figures out the navigation of this site there is a true wealth of information provided for the amateur astronomer, undergraduate and high school astronomy student, and historian of astronomy.