

# WHAT HAPPENED TO COMET KOHOUTEK?

by G. N. PATTERSON\*

The much publicized "Comet-of-the-Century" turned out to be a visual dud. What happened to it? Was the best scientific observational program a waste of time?

What actually happened is, of course, well known. It's the "Why?" that is yet unanswered. The comet brightened gradually as it approached the sun, although not as brilliant as originally forecast. It did achieve a brilliance as bright as Venus when it was close in to the sun but only the SKYLAB astronauts could see it at that time. Then, as it swung around the sun, the brilliance dropped sharply and it was only visible to the naked eye, provided you knew exactly where to look for it, for less than a week. It gradually faded in brightness until it could only be seen with the aid of binoculars or a telescope. The great sweeping tail forecast never did develop. Why?

Any answer to this question is highly speculative at this time. The recasting of a comet's brightness is always a calculated guess based on the performance of previous comets and, hence, is a very unpredictable figure. So much depends upon the constituents that form the nucleus of the comet and these can only be known after the comet has developed. In this instance, the final answer will only be known when all the observational data is recovered and analyzed and that could take up to a year or more.

What is known is that the nucleus of

Comet Kohoutek was larger than any other known comet since scientific measurements have been taken. Earth-based spectroscopic measurements have been taken showing a wide variety of chemical constituents common to other comets, plus other constituents not noticed in previous comets. The full story will only be completed once the data from SKYLAB is recovered and analyzed.

It is presently being speculated that Comet Kohoutek is a new kind of comet. The vast amount of data being obtained will result in a very intensive re-appraisal of our present concept of comets and, because of this, Comet Kohoutek can still justifiably be labelled "The Comet of the Century", even though it resulted in a very poor visual display.

## 30 Years Ago

Those who knew the *Blue Jay* thirty years ago will remember the stiff yellow cover with the blue lettering, on which appeared the names of the officers of the Yorkton Natural History Society and a statement of the Society's objects. The stated aim of the Society was simply expressed, but comprehensive: "To foster an active interest in every branch of nature study, and to promote the conservation of all wild life; also to act as a connecting link between nature lovers in Saskatchewan."

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