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SETI: Alien Search Diary

From: Stig Agermose <stig.agermose@get2net.dk>
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Stig

Alien Search Diary

**

The world's most methodical search for extraterrestrial intelligence has resumed at Puerto Rico's Arecibo Observatory -- home of a one-of-a-kind 1,000-foot radio telescope, the most sophisticated listening device in the known universe.

Find out what happens every night from reporter Irene Brown, as she tracks the progress of Project Phoenix, sponsored by the privately funded SETI Institute.

Says Irene, the researchers have developed a device that can listen in and analyze 28 million channels at once. "What they are looking for is a signal that stands out on one frequency alone, like one blade of grass standing tall in a field of two billion shoots."

Read about what they discover below.

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The first week of observation at Arecibo is drawing to an end. Tonight the SETI folks are hosting a party at the observatory's pool.

There is good reason to celebrate. Most of the kinks have been worked out of the system the team uses to search for extraterrestrial signals. One problem lingers, however: radio interference.

Transmissions from Earth-based systems can overwhelm radio signals from stars. And the Arecibo telescope is a most sensitive ear. The scientists are finding even more interference than they did during Project Phoenix's last run at Arecibo in September.

The primary culprit is the U.S. military, which is beginning to

test a multi-frequency radar nearby to replace their old two-frequency system. Telescope operators have met with Defense Department officials to try and explain the situation.

"At best, we're stuck with the same old pair of frequencies (in blockage). At worst, we lose more of the spectrum," says astronomer Jill Tarter. "We'll just have to wait and see."

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"We're trying to tell our right hand from our left," says Project Phoenix director Jill Tarter.

Huh?

Jill's missing her morning jog to figure out if the Arecibo telescope and a backup observatory in Jodrell Bank, England, are on the same wavelength, so to speak.

The team looking for alien radio transmissions wants simultaneous observations from the British observatory to verify any suspect signals. Both sites try to lock on to a known naturally occurring source of radio transmissions to check the telescopes' configurations. The ability to verify the authenticity of a signal is crucial.

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"It's finally working," says astronomer Seth Shostak, sounding relaxed and pleased near the end of his shift. As he talks, he's watching over computer monitors that flicker with data from a sun-like star in the constellation Leo about eight light-years away from Earth.

A software glitch wiped out most of the previous night's work and had forced Shostak to spend part of the evening patiently charting sources of terrestrial radio interference.

Then it was on to the stars. Project Phoenix, as the current search for ET is called, ultimately will look at 1,000 nearby stars to try and discern if artificial signals are riding on their radio waves. The team chases a few leads, but they turn out to be radar signals and a satellite passing overhead.

Says Shostak, "For two minutes at least, we had a little bit of excitement."

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Work for the SETI crew at Arecibo begins in earnest after dinner. They work a night shift with the telescope, starting in the evening and typically ending around dawn.

After a chicken lasagna and rice dinner, ET-hunter Seth Shostak and colleagues turn their attention to the sky. One of their first tasks: to look for an old friend.

Billions of miles from home, the Pioneer 10 spacecraft rises in the evening sky. The only known extraterrestrial signal in the universe, Pioneer 10 is the watch to which the SETI scientists can set their clocks. If the team can pick up Pioneer's call, they'll know their equipment is working properly.

They find it, reports Shostak, but in only one receiver. The SETI team uses two receivers to make sure ET isn't making a hoax call.

Engineers scramble throughout the night chasing technical gremlins. Shostak, meanwhile, tunes the receiver to empty space so the SETI computers can learn where it's too noisy with radio transmissions to even bother looking for ET.

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The SETI scientists are happy to be back in their telescope control room at the Arecibo Observatory after a six-month break. But there's a snag.

Technicians have been preparing equipment for two weeks, but the night before the team begins to comb radio waves for signs of extraterrestrials, one of four crucial signal detection boards crashes and dies. The backup doesn't work either, so an engineer is dispatched from Puerto Rico by airplane to work on a replacement in the United States.

In the meantime, Project Phoenix director Jill Tarter wants to survey for pockets of interference from Earthly radio transmissions. "They've done a lot of work at the observatory to track down their internal sources of interference," says Tarter, hopeful that more frequencies will be clearer now for any detection of ET's call.

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