

Comet McNaught, (C/2006 P1) was discovered by Robert McNaught working at the Siding Spring Observatory in New South Wales Australia in August 2006. When discovered, the comet was a very faint object, but when its orbital elements were calculated, it was realized that this comet had the potential to be a bright object. Its perihelion was calculated to bring it as close as 15.8 million miles from the Sun, that is about half the orbital distance of Mercury. Its brightest predicted magnitude was about +3, but comets are unpredictable and McNaught greatly exceeded its predicted magnitude. It possibly underwent a flare up because its nucleus attained a magnitude about that of the planet Jupiter -2.

For most of the time, the comet remained a southern hemisphere object, but for just a few days in January 2007, the comet was accessible to northern hemisphere observers.

During this time the comet was, for a short time, observable as both a morning and evening object. Then it moved into the evening twilight sky close to the south-western horizon. For this reason it was difficult to observe as a very low unobstructed horizon was required – a difficult requirement from London.

Nevertheless, two members managed to view the comet. On the evening of January 11<sup>th</sup>, Daniel Pooley observed it from Parliament Hill and Simon Lang managed to get an image observing from the top of a tall building in Frognal Gardens.

Both described the comet as having a bright stellar like nucleus and a long broad tail extending for at least 5 degrees.

Comet McNaught has been described as ‘the brightest comet for 40 years’. It is a pity that it remained in the northern hemisphere sky for so short a time and in such an inaccessible position.



*Picture 1: Comet McNaught a 3 second exposure by Simon Lang on January 11th from Hampstead.*

**Doug Daniels (HSS Astro. Sec.)**