

by Todd Carlson



SkyShed observatory

Roll-off-roof telescope shelter installed in a day

I WILL SHEEPISHLY ADMIT THAT ON occasion, I have looked outside to see a clear night sky but have decided to remain indoors, discouraged at the thought of having to set up my equipment, only to have to disassemble it a few hours later and lug it back inside. The convenience of having my own observatory has always been a dream for me, but my crude carpentry skills realistically suggest that a homebuilt observatory isn't in my immediate future.

For five years, Wayne Parker and Brad Adams worked to develop a fully functional, yet affordable backyard observatory for amateur astronomers. Having designed and built thousands of garden sheds and

cabanas with his company Northsheds, Adams combined his extensive expertise with Parker's vast knowledge of astronomy. The result was the debut of the Northsheds SkyShed at Starfest 2003. Intrigued, I seriously began to think about having a SkyShed constructed.

During my first phone call to Parker, I explained that I wanted to house my 4-inch f/9 fluorite refractor and my 12.5-inch Porta-Ball reflector. We decided that a 10-by-12-foot SkyShed would suit my requirements. I also asked Northsheds to provide a metal pier for the refractor's equatorial mount (piers can also be purchased separately). At my height (six-foot-three), I opted to have

the walls built six inches higher than standard. After browsing their on-line gallery, I chose to have the SkyShed stained grey.

Parker and Adams travel to the site before construction to survey the location and install a concrete base for the pier, but I opted to install the pier myself. Accurate polar alignment was not necessary before installation because the rotatable pier head allows the mounting bolts to be set in the concrete without concern for polar alignment.

At Adams' facility, the SkyShed's pine and spruce walls and floor are prefabricated and the stain is applied. This means a SkyShed can be entirely installed by a two-man crew in one day—in my case, it was completed in seven hours.

The two telescopes do, indeed, fit comfortably in the SkyShed. To prevent foot-step vibrations from propagating through the wooden floor to the reflector, two rectangles were cut in the floor parallel to the supporting beams underneath. I laid 12-by-24-inch patio slabs in each until the slabs were slightly higher than the floorboards. A 5-inch-thick concrete patio block was then placed on top of the slabs. The result is a solid, vibration-free base for the reflector.

The inner walls are covered with Tyvek



LETTING IT ROLL Designed to blend in with other garden sheds in the neighbourhood, the SkyShed comes as a finished installation or as a kit with instructions. The faux windows and the flower boxes are a nice touch. The garage-door technology (below) used for the rails and wheels of the roll-off roof ensures easy opening and closing by one person. Although traditional domes are still used by amateur astronomers, roll-offs are more popular.



TODD CARLSON (ALL)

A TRUE SCOPE SANCTUARY

Comfortably housing a 4-inch refractor and a 12.5-inch Newtonian telescope, this 10-by-12-foot SkyShed provides a permanent home for eyepieces, charts and other observing essentials. The smallest SkyShed (6 by 6 feet) will fit in the most cramped backyard, while the largest can accommodate up to three telescopes.



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Poster
1



Jupiter photographed by NASA's Cassini interplanetary spacecraft. Originally included in the January/February 2004 issue of SkyNews.

Side two: Galaxy NGC3370 photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope.



Poster
2

Hubble Ultra Deep Field reveals 10,000 galaxies in one majestic view. Originally included in the May/June 2004 issue of SkyNews.



Side two: The SkyNews Editors' Choice Photo of the Week Contest winners for 2003-04.

to prevent dust or snow from blowing inside, while vents in the roof at each end allow air to circulate. To keep the interior temperature to a minimum, metal roofing is used rather than shingles. A set of garage-door track and rollers enables the roof to slide effortlessly when using the installed handle, although I did attach a short pull cord to facilitate easier opening and closing. If the ground beneath the SkyShed does begin to settle, specially designed Northsheds support jacks allow easy adjustment to the height of the track-support beams.

The SkyShed has functioned perfectly after many nights of use and has ended my struggles to lug my telescope equipment to and from the backyard. Now, with an easy push of my observatory roof, the stars are mine to behold. ■

EDITOR'S NOTE: A few weeks after SkyNews assistant editor Todd Carlson wrote this review of his newly purchased SkyShed, he was approached by company president Wayne Parker to become

a part-time regional SkyShed representative, handling observatory installations in the Orillia-Muskoka-North Bay region of central Ontario. This review has not been modified since Todd accepted that position.

PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS

Available in sizes ranging from 6 by 6 feet to 12 by 16 feet, the SkyShed is designed to be fully functional yet still blend in with either suburban or rural surroundings. Installation by Northsheds is limited to Ontario and Quebec. There is no extra charge within 200 kilometres of Newmarket, Ontario. More distant customers can call for a delivery quote (519-345-0036). For do-it-yourselfers (or installation by your local carpenter), detailed plans on CD are available for \$79.95 (US\$59.95) from the SkyShed website (www.skyshed.com) or from your local astronomy retailer. Prefabricated kits can be picked up at the Newmarket facility or delivered to your site for the kit price plus \$300 within south and central Ontario (Ottawa to North Bay to Windsor; beyond those areas, call for a quote). The cost of the CD is deducted if an installed or kit SkyShed is subsequently purchased.