

Astrobiology News November 2019: Exoplanet Hunting Around the World

What do a retired California computer executive, an Australian car mechanic, and a Canadian aerospace machinist have in common? No – this isn't the beginning of a bad joke. All three of these people have made remarkable discoveries while searching for exoplanets¹ in *Zooniverse*, the world's largest and most popular platform for online citizen science.² Two of these exoplanet hunters – Kian Jek and Daryll LaCourse - received prestigious Chambliss Amateur Achievement Awards from the American Astronomical Society for their contributions.³

Late last month, the Adler Planetarium won a 2019 Chicago Innovation Collaboration Award for *Zooniverse*.⁴ The discovery by exoplanet hunters of what has been described as “the strangest star in the Galaxy”⁵ provides an excellent example of the role of collaboration in working to solve a perplexing scientific puzzle. Many explanations have been proposed for the weird fluctuations in the light output of KIC 8562852 (also known as “Tabby’s Star” or “Boyajian’s Star”) – explanations ranging from orbiting exo-comets to alien megastructures!⁶ Thus far, none of the explanations has been able to explain the bizarre behavior of this star satisfactorily.

Both professional and amateur astronomers are collaborating to explore the question, KIC 8462852: WTF? (Uh - that stands for, Where’s The Flux?) They’ve created an independent website dedicated to sharing ideas that might explain the star’s idiosyncrasies, and to raising money for conducting further observations to test these ideas.⁷ Donations are gratefully acknowledged and memorabilia may be purchased through the online store.

Curiosity and the allure of a good mystery lie at the heart of the scientific enterprise. In his new book, *Zooniverse* creator Chris Lintott takes the reader on a journey through the many remarkable ways that people from all walks of life around the world are contributing to this enterprise.⁸

Until next month,

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¹ <https://blog.planethunters.org/category/papers/page/2/>

² <https://www.zooniverse.org>

³ <https://aas.org/grants-and-prizes/chambliss-amateur-achievement-award>

⁴ <https://chicagoinnovation.com/winners/adler-planetarium/>

⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/how-citizen-scientists-discovered-the-strangest-star-in-the-galaxy/>

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https://www.ted.com/talks/tabetha_boyajian_the_most_mysterious_star_in_the_universe

⁷ <https://www.wheretheflux.com/about-us>

⁸ C. Lintott, *The Crowd and the Cosmos: Adventures in the Zooniverse* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019)