Searching for Intragroup Light in Normal and Compact Galaxy Groups

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Introduction

Intracluster light (ICL), coming from stars between the galaxies, has been found to be common in galaxy clusters (Feldmeier et al. 2004; Mihos et al. 2005; see Arnaboldi et al. 2009 for a recent review). However, the amount of **intragroup light** (**IGL**) is much less well known. Theoretical studies (Fig.1; Purcell et al. 2007) indicate a systematic rise in IGL fraction as systems increase in mass from individual galaxies, through galaxy groups up to galaxy clusters. Unfortunately, thus far observations of IGL in normal galaxy groups have been unsuccessful. The amount of IGL found in compact groups of galaxies, where the extreme galaxy density promotes many tidal interactions, is much larger, but there is considerable scatter in the observations thus far (Fig 2).

We have begun an effort to quantify the amount of IGL in both normal and compact galaxy groups. Using the techniques of ultra-low surface brightness imaging that we have developed for galaxy clusters, we should be able to measure the amount and spatial distribution of the IGL, and search for any tidal debris present in these systems.

We have begun a deep imaging survey intended to search for intragroup stars in both conventional and compact galaxy groups. We find evidence for extensive intragroup light and tidal debris in our compact group sub-sample, as expected, but only small amounts of intragroup light thus far in conventional groups.

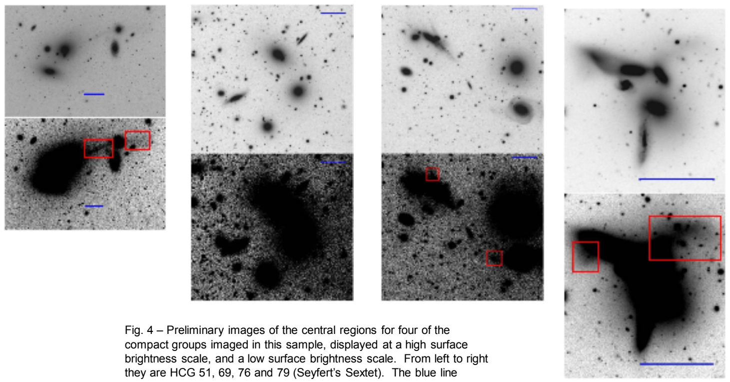

Fig. 4 – Preliminary images of the central regions for four of the compact groups imaged in this sample, displayed at a high surface brightness scale, and a low surface brightness scale. From left to right they are HCG 51, 69, 76 and 79 (Seyfert's Sextet). The blue line denotes a scale bar of 1'. The red rectangles show examples of interesting tidal features, some that are already well studied, and some not as well known. With additional analysis, fainter features may also be visible.

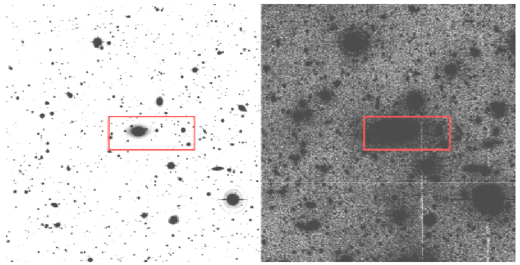

Fig. 5 – A 23' x 33' (corresponding to 460 x 660 kpc) image of the center of the Cancer A galaxy group, displayed at two different surface brightness levels. The luminous S0 galaxy NGC 2563 (included within the red rectangle), shows signs of interactions, as originally found by Forbes & Thomson (1992), but there seems to be little overall intragroup light. Careful subtraction of the nearby stars using careful modelling (Slater, Harding, & Mihos 2009) will be needed to make a precise estimate.

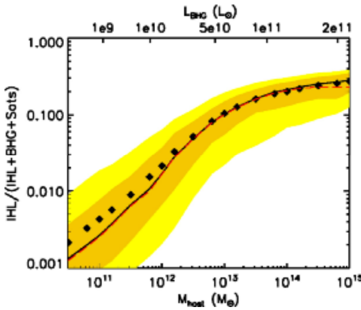

Fig. 1 – Results from Purcell et al. (2007) showing the amount of diffuse light expected from objects varying in mass from individual galaxies to rich galaxy clusters. There is a systematic increase in IGL fraction as a function of host mass.

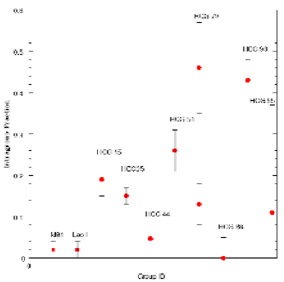

Fig. 2 – A summary of observed IGL fractions to date. Squares denote normal galaxy groups, and circles denote compact groups. Data is taken from Nishiura et al. (2000), Feldmeier et al. (2003), Castro-Rodriguez et al. (2003), Durrell et al. (2003), White et al. (2003), Aguerri et al. (2006), and Da Rocha et al. (2005, 2008)

Sample and Analysis

Our goal is to construct a representative sample of both types of galaxy groups, so that relative and absolute comparisons of IGL properties can be made. A key restriction is to avoid galaxy groups that are near bright foreground stars. As has been known for decades (King 1971), the scattered light profile of luminous stars extends for degrees and can create a significant systematic error in sky subtraction. Likewise, we avoid groups that have large amounts of Galactic cirrus in the field, as these cause reflection nebulae at the low surface brightness limits we are probing.

We have used the KPNO 2.1m telescope for our imaging of compact groups, and the CWRU 0.6m Burrell Schmidt telescope for observing conventional galaxy groups. We have a total of six compact groups, and three conventional galaxy groups observed thus far.

The techniques of low-surface brightness imaging are now well understood for these telescopes (Morrison, Boroson & Harding 1994; Feldmeier et al. 2002, 2004; Mihos et al. 2005), and include: 1) baffling the telescope and detector, 2) constructing high-quality dark sky flats (see Figure 3 below), and 3) constructing careful error models, including all sources of noise, both random and systematic. The limiting surface brightness of our observations depends on the large-scale flat-fielding error, which typically reaches 0.1% or better.

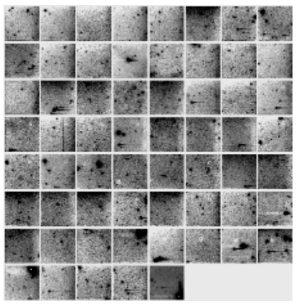

Fig. 3 – Images of some of our blank sky frames used in constructing the master sky flat for the KPNO 2.1m data, after being flat-fielded and averaged into 50 × 50 pixel bins. The small-scale variations are due to bright stars and galaxies in each individual frame, but the large-scale variations are due to changes in the sky illumination. A dust "donut" particle that appeared in the middle of the telescope run is also visible in the later images. All of these features are masked before the final flat-field is created.

Preliminary Results

As would be expected, we see a large number of tidal features in our compact group sample (see Figure 4 for numerous examples). Given the extreme density of these systems, this should be expected. We also see signs of fainter tidal features that are less well known, and in some groups, see evidence for a fainter envelope surrounding the galaxies (most notably in Seyfert's Sextet; Palma et al. 2004; Durbala et al. 2008).

The amount of tidal debris in conventional galaxy groups is naturally less common, but we have confirmed the shell-like structure seen in NGC 2563 located at the center of Cancer A group (Forbes & Thomson 1992)

Determining the exact amount of IGL in both normal and compact groups is substantially more difficult:. In the case of compact groups, accurately defining the IGL will be major challenge. From our previous work, we have found that using observational definitions can be misleading if not corrected for properly. We plan to compare our results to numerical simulations (Rudick, Mihos & McBride 2006) to correct for projection effects. For conventional galaxy groups the limiting factors will be: 1) the amount of large-scale flat-fielding error, since the groups cover a large portion of sky, and 2) proper subtraction for foreground stars. Fortunately, the scattered light profile of the Burrell Schmidt is very well understood (Slater, Harding & Mihos 2009), and this subtraction will be straightforward.

Acknowledgements

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Future Work

Once the data analysis is completed, we should be able to place a stringent limit on the amount of IGL in each group. The wide (1.5 degree field) of the Burrell Schmidt ensures that sky subtraction will not be an issue.

In addition to the IGL studies, we will also perform surface photometry on all of the galaxies in each group and we will search for dwarf galaxy candidates in our data. The number of dwarf galaxies in galaxy groups is still an unresolved problem for the models of hierarchical structure formation, and our data will not be as prone to selection effects due to low surface brightness.

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