A BVRcIc SURVEY OF W URSAE MAJORIS BINARIES

DIRK TERRELL1, JOHN GROSS2, AND WALTER R. COONEY, JR.3

1 Department of Space Studies, Southwest Research Institute, 1050 Walnut Street, Suite 300, Boulder, CO 80302, USA; terrell@boulder.swri.edu
2 Sonoita Research Observatory, 1442 E Roger Road, Tucson, AZ 85719, USA; johngross3@msn.com
3 Lot No. 23, Palamair Village, 281 Burapha Golf Club, Moo 4, Bung, Sriracha, Chonburi 20110, Thailand; walcr@cox.net

Received 2012 January 30; accepted 2012 February 12; published 2012 March 15

ABSTRACT

We report on a BVRcIc survey of field W Ursae Majoris binary stars and present accurate colors for 606 systems that have been observed on at least three photometric nights from a robotic observatory in southern Arizona. Comparison with earlier photometry for a subset of the systems shows good agreement. We investigate two independent methods of determining the interstellar reddening, although both have limitations that can render them less effective than desired. A subset of 101 systems shows good agreement between the two reddening methods.

Key words: binaries: close – binaries: eclipsing

Online-only material: machine-readable and VO tables

1. INTRODUCTION

Overcontact binary stars4 are systems in which both components share a common envelope between the inner and outer contact surfaces, and are therefore in physical contact with one another, leading to luminosity and mass exchange. Such systems show light curves with very similar eclipse depths and little color variation over the orbital cycle. The W Ursae Majoris systems are the most well-known overcontact systems, consisting of F-, G-, and K-type stars with convective common envelopes. But early-type systems with radiative common envelopes do exist (Terrell et al. 2003) and are even quite common among the O-type stars (Hilditch & Bell 1987).

Despite over four decades of efforts to understand their internal structure and evolution, no model has emerged as clearly superior in explaining their observed properties, although active work (e.g., Stepień 2009, 2011) does show promise. Almost all of the theoretical work on overcontact systems has involved the W UMa systems, although the evolutionary models of Nelson & Eggleton (2001) show that the overcontact state is achieved for a wide variety of binary initial conditions (viz., their Figure 9). The seminal work by Lucy (1968) showed that overcontact systems with common convective envelopes could exist at zero age but the agreement of his models with the observed period–color relation (Eggen 1967) was not very good and Eggen’s period–color relation has played a critical role in the testing of models of W UMa systems ever since. The primary goal of this survey is to provide a significantly larger sample of overcontact systems with accurate photometry and to extend the photometry to the RcIc passbands.

Although the proliferation of relatively inexpensive CCD cameras and telescopes has resulted in a large body of light curve data for W UMa systems, most of these data are instrumental differential magnitudes rather than transformed standard magnitudes, a circumstance dictated in most cases by the predominantly non-photometric skies available to the observers. Rucinski (2006) discusses the period–color–luminosity relationship for W UMa systems and its use as a distance indicator for these systems. One goal of our program is to provide more accurate color data than is currently available for this calibration. Accurate colors are also necessary for light curve solutions where the spectral type of the system is not available.

2. SONOITA RESEARCH OBSERVATORY

2.1. Hardware

The goal of our survey program is to measure accurate colors of a large number of W UMa systems brighter than 14th magnitude visible from our observatory in Sonoita, Arizona. The equipment at the Sonoita Research Observatory (SRO) consists of a 0.35 m Schmidt–Cassegrain telescope on a robotic German equatorial mount, a Santa Barbara Instrument Group STL-1001E CCD camera and a Custom Scientific BVRcIc filter set with the Bessell (1990) prescriptions. With this equipment, we can achieve photometric precisions of 0.01 mag at 14th magnitude with reasonable integration times.

The observatory sits on a private site located about 60 miles east–southeast of Kitt Peak National Observatory in very dark skies. Previously unknown main-belt asteroids in the 19th–20th magnitude range have been discovered in five-minute unfiltered images taken at SRO, and stacked, unfiltered images have revealed 23rd magnitude stars. Seeing is typically 2′′–3′′ full width at half-maximum.

2.2. Software

As with all robotic observatories, the main determinant of observing efficiency at SRO has been the software used to control the telescope and camera. All of the observing software we use is commercially available. The two key software programs are ACP Observatory Control Software (hereafter ACP) and ACP Scheduler from DC-3 Dreams, Incorporated of Mesa, Arizona.5 Overall operations control is handled by ACP. At the beginning of each night, it opens the dome, and takes twilight flats. During the night, it monitors the weather conditions (closing the dome if the weather degrades to a dangerous state), moves the telescope and dome, instructs the camera control software to take images, and monitors the telescope focus, refocusing as needed. At the end of the night, it takes more twilight flats and then parks the telescope and closes

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4 We note that there is a preference among some in the community for the term “contact” rather than “overcontact.” Rucinski (1997a) and Wilson (2001) discuss both sides of the issue.

5 Web site at http://www.dc3.com.
the dome. The entire operation is run unattended, allowing for a
tremendous increase in observing efficiency over traditional
human-driven telescope operations.

The primary enabler of a survey project like this one is
the scheduling software. The ACP Scheduler is a real-time
scheduler that can adjust to changing observing conditions
and observing priorities, as opposed to the traditional queue
schedulers that decide the observing plan at the beginning of
the night. Executing a survey like this one involves merely
entering the coordinates of the desired fields (i.e., standard star
fields) and dark subtracted and flat fielded. Extinction coefficients
are first determined and then the transformation coefficients
determined. This part of the process is interactive, with plots
that allow the user to determine the quality of the night and delete
obviously bad images from the reduction. Once the extinction
and transformation coefficients are known, the images of target
fields can be reduced and the observations transformed onto
the standard system. Aperture photometry is performed with
an aperture radius of eight pixels, sky annulus radius of twelve
pixels, and annulus thickness of three pixels. The pixels subtend
\'\'24 on the sky.

3. DATA GATHERING AND PROCESSING

While the observatory operation for the survey is untradi-
tional, the data gathering is not. The goal is to measure the
magnitude of a reasonably bright star with a $B-V$ value near zero through each filter periodically
during the night as it moves through a reasonable range of airmass,
typically from 1.0 to 2.5 airmasses. The star is chosen so
that it can be observed low in the eastern sky at the beginning of
the night, up to the zenith, and then in the western sky late in the
night. This approach typically yields a dozen measure-
ments through each filter per night, and covers both sides of the
meridian, providing a diagnostic of the photometric quality of
the night. A linear fit of instrumental magnitude versus airmass
then provides the (first-order) extinction coefficient.

Observations of standard and target fields are made in the
sequence $I_C, R_C, V, B$, and then $B, V, R_C, I_C$ to minimize
extinction issues. The 2 mag measurements for each star in
each filter are averaged to provide coeval values for forming
colors. Determination of the transformation coefficients is done
in the usual way by observing several Landolt standard fields
near the meridian during the night and then performing linear
fits to the various instrumental versus standard magnitude plots.

As images are collected during the night, they are losslessly
compressed and transferred to a storage server at the lead
author’s institution. Processing of the images is performed with
scripts written in PyRAF, a Python interface to IRAF available
from the Space Science Institute Web site. They are then bias
and dark subtracted and flat fielded. Extinction coefficients
are first determined and then the transformation coefficients
determined. This part of the process is interactive, with plots
that allow the user to determine the quality of the night and delete
obviously bad images from the reduction. Once the extinction
and transformation coefficients are known, the images of target
fields can be reduced and the observations transformed onto
the standard system.

4. SURVEY TARGETS AND RESULTS

The survey began in 2005 with targets selected from the
Pribulla et al. (2003), hereafter PKT, catalog of 361 overcontact
systems. Soon thereafter, Gettel et al. (2006), hereafter GGM,
published a catalog of 1022 overcontact systems identified from
ROTSE-I sky patrol images. The final list of observed targets
came primarily from these two catalogs, with two systems
(GSC 0067-00348 and GSC 2545-00970) added after we made
follow-up observations of new discoveries. The last of the
observations reported herein were made in 2008. Observations
were made on 237 photometric nights, with this project sharing
 telescope time with several other survey projects.

In total, 606 systems with $9 \leq V_{max} \leq 13$ had observations
of sufficient quality to be listed in Table 1. The table is given in
abbreviated form in the printed version of the paper to show the

\[ \text{Table 1} \]

| System | R.A. | Decl. | Period | Num. Obs. | $B-V$ | $V - R_C$ | $R_C - I_C$ | $V - I_C$ | $V_{max}$ | $V_{min}$ |
|--------|------|-------|--------|----------|--------|------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| 299755 | 1.4917 | 78.9081 | 0.43821290 | 3 | 0.562 ± 0.016 | 0.332 ± 0.003 | 0.348 ± 0.004 | 0.680 ± 0.005 | 11.83 | 12.50 |
| 1557554 | 1.6542 | 55.4561 | 0.27249130 | 3 | 0.874 ± 0.007 | 0.510 ± 0.007 | 0.432 ± 0.016 | 0.942 ± 0.017 | 9.33 | 9.64 |
| V1007 Cas | 2.0125 | 51.1342 | 0.33201060 | 3 | 0.724 ± 0.027 | 0.459 ± 0.004 | 0.437 ± 0.010 | 0.896 ± 0.011 | 12.03 | 12.43 |
| 11936075 | 3.9833 | 6.7457 | 0.40117920 | 3 | 0.519 ± 0.012 | 0.308 ± 0.008 | 0.332 ± 0.009 | 0.640 ± 0.012 | 11.30 | 11.71 |
| 9107370 | 4.0583 | 22.1661 | 0.24090500 | 3 | 0.512 ± 0.009 | 0.324 ± 0.015 | 0.322 ± 0.014 | 0.646 ± 0.021 | 11.49 | 11.82 |
| CN And | 5.2560 | 40.2261 | 0.46279111 | 4 | 0.516 ± 0.012 | 0.277 ± 0.011 | 0.278 ± 0.014 | 0.555 ± 0.018 | 9.70 | 10.25 |
| 6335770 | 6.3292 | 32.4657 | 0.54349740 | 3 | 0.377 ± 0.021 | 0.231 ± 0.006 | 0.236 ± 0.004 | 0.467 ± 0.007 | 10.25 | 10.56 |
| 9093368 | 6.7958 | 10.0151 | 0.52122360 | 4 | 0.534 ± 0.013 | 0.313 ± 0.011 | 0.299 ± 0.014 | 0.612 ± 0.018 | 10.19 | 10.61 |
| 14680632 | 7.0875 | -14.8881 | 0.40264980 | 3 | 0.577 ± 0.017 | 0.351 ± 0.007 | 0.351 ± 0.017 | 0.702 ± 0.018 | 11.56 | 11.91 |
| 254036 | 7.1167 | 78.9619 | 0.31741200 | 3 | 0.586 ± 0.008 | 0.356 ± 0.015 | 0.350 ± 0.005 | 0.706 ± 0.016 | 10.56 | 10.93 |
| CL Cet | 7.2667 | -17.2169 | 0.62161800 | 3 | 0.389 ± 0.007 | 0.221 ± 0.013 | 0.233 ± 0.007 | 0.454 ± 0.015 | 9.88 | 10.00 |
| 3667194 | 7.6417 | 39.4564 | 0.41711880 | 3 | 0.571 ± 0.018 | 0.337 ± 0.003 | 0.354 ± 0.002 | 0.691 ± 0.004 | 12.08 | 12.47 |
| 9141373 | 7.6917 | 14.5461 | 0.34255000 | 4 | 0.589 ± 0.011 | 0.384 ± 0.017 | 0.345 ± 0.017 | 0.729 ± 0.024 | 11.22 | 11.55 |
| 9124077 | 8.5542 | 20.8739 | 0.34014730 | 3 | 0.596 ± 0.008 | 0.392 ± 0.017 | 0.368 ± 0.001 | 0.760 ± 0.017 | 11.91 | 12.21 |

(This table is available in its entirety in machine-readable and Virtual Observatory (VO) forms in the online journal. A portion is shown here for guidance regarding its form and content.)
The star identifications are either the GCVS designation, if known, or the designation given in GGM. The objects listed by their identification from the GGM catalog can be searched in the SIMBAD database by using the “ggm2006” catalog identifier. We chose to retain the GGM designation because SIMBAD does not list Guide Star Catalog identifications of many of these systems. The positions, orbital periods, and maximum/minimum \( V \) magnitudes are taken from either the PKT or the GGM catalogs. In a handful of cases, the positions are from astrometry of our images where the GGM positions were ambiguous due to blending. All systems were observed on at least three nights but 251 systems had observations on four or more nights. The \( B - V \), \( V - R_C \), and \( R_C - I_C \) colors are given as measured, and the \( V - I_C \) color is formed as the sum of \( V - R_C \) and \( R_C - I_C \). The errors given are the standard deviations of the individual measurements, and these include both the measurement errors and any intrinsic color changes in the stars, which we assume to be small.

To assess the accuracy of the colors, they were compared to values found in the \textit{Tycho} catalog and from other sources in the literature. The bulk of the comparison data came from the \textit{Tycho} catalog and were selected for comparison to our data if the error listed in the \textit{Tycho} catalog was 0.05 mag or less. To extend the comparison past \( B - V = 1 \), values for CC Com (Bradstreet 1985), VZ Psc (Bradstreet 1985), and V523 Cas (Samec et al. 2004) were taken from the literature. Figure 1 shows our \( B - V \) values plotted against the comparison data. Figure 2 shows our \( V - I_C \) values plotted against values from \textit{Tycho} and the literature. Once again, the red end of the figure was extended past the range of accurate \textit{Tycho} values, with the value for XY Leo taken from Hrivnak (1985) and values for CC Com, VZ Psc, V523 Cas, V574 Lyr, CT Tau, LR Cam, 766402, 7710246, and 13149917 taken from The Amateur Sky Survey Mark IV (TASS; Droege et al. 2006). On the blue end, values for CT Tau and 2962451 were also taken from the TASS catalog. Both figures show good agreement between our photometry and that of others.

We examined our data for any systematic dependences of the errors on various quantities. One obvious dependence would be on the magnitude of the binary. In a constant-exposure survey, this type of dependence is expected and easily revealed. Our survey, however, had exposures optimized for each individual system, and our targets are all in the brightness range where we expect intrinsic color variability and the transformation to the standard system to be the dominant noise sources, rather than sources like photon noise or sky background noise. In that case, we do not expect to see any strong dependence on the brightness of the system and Figure 3 shows this to be the case.

Another possibility is a dependence of the color error on the color itself. Our exposure times were determined using the \( V \) magnitude of the binary at maximum brightness and the known sensitivity of the equipment for each filter. Redder systems would require a longer exposure in \( B \) than a bluer system of the same brightness in order to have the same signal-to-noise ratio for photon noise (the dominant noise source in a given exposure for our equipment and the magnitude range of our survey). Since our exposures were set to achieve a signal-to-noise ratio of 200 or better (for photon noise) for each exposure, we still expect the observed errors to be dominated by intrinsic variability and transformation uncertainties. Figure 4 shows that this is indeed the case.

5. REDDENING

To be of the most usefulness, the colors of the stars need to be corrected for the effect of interstellar reddening. Normally,
an accurate measurement of the reddening requires a detailed spectroscopic analysis, such as that employed by Terrell et al. (2003) using the Na D lines as calibrated by Munari & Zwitter (1997). For the majority of the systems in our survey, such data do not exist. We therefore present a preliminary analysis using two approaches for which complete data are available: determining a reddening-free quantity from our photometry, and computing the reddening from the neutral hydrogen column density, \( N_{\text{H}} \), along the line of sight to the system. The former approach, referred to hereafter as the color difference method, follows that used for early-type stars with \( U-B \) and \( B-V \) colors to determine the reddening-free parameter \( Q \) (Johnson & Morgan 1953). The latter is the method employed by Rucinski (1997). The latter is the method employed by Rucinski (1997). The latter is the method employed by Rucinski (1997). The latter is the method employed by Rucinski (1997).

While these approaches have limitations, as discussed below, we believe they can provide useful information until better data can be obtained.

Following conventional notation, we write the observed color as \( B-V \), the unreddened color as \( (B-V)_0 \), and the reddening as \( E(B-V) \) so that \( B-V = (B-V)_0 + E(B-V) \). The color difference method uses the difference in two colors to form a reddening-free quantity usually represented by the letter \( Q \). The key is to multiply one of the colors by a constant factor representing the ratio of the color excesses for the two colors, i.e., \( Q = C1 - (E(C1)/E(C2)) \times C2 \). While the traditional \( Q \) quantity, \( (U - B) - E(U - B)/E(B-V) \times (B - V) \), is not useful for the stars of spectral types in this survey, the basic idea can be applied to more appropriate filters. Here we use the \( B-V \) and \( V-I \) colors, and thus define \( Q \) as \( (B-V) - E(B-V)/E(V-I) \times (V-I) \). Using the absorption ratios, \( A(\lambda)/A(V) \), given in Cardelli et al. (1989) and assuming a total to selective extinction ratio of \( R_V = 3.1 \), the ratio \( E(B-V)/E(V-I) \) has a value of 0.647.

Figure 5 is the color difference diagram for all of the systems in the survey. The solid curve shows the main sequence from Walker (1985) for \( V - I_c \leq 0.95 \) and Cousins (1978) for \( V - I_c > 0.95 \). Because \( Q \) is reddening-independent, the reddening lines in such a diagram are horizontal and can be used to estimate the reddening of a given star. The horizontal line in Figure 5 shows the reddening of a main-sequence star with \( V-I_c = 0.79 \) and the vertical ticks indicate increasing reddening in steps of 0.1 in \( E(B-V) \).

One concern with this approach to determining the reddening is that many, perhaps all (Pribulla & Rucinski 2008), of these objects have companions and this can have a large effect on the color difference diagram. If, as is usually the case, the companions are cool, low-mass objects, they will affect the longer wavelength filters more than the shorter ones, and make the systems look redder than they otherwise would be. However, in most circumstances we expect the third bodies to be of low luminosities, making the effect on the system colors fairly small, perhaps a few hundredths of a magnitude. Unfortunately, these errors are large enough to greatly diminish the usefulness of the color difference diagram for systems only slightly affected by interstellar reddening, as we expect most of these systems to be due to their brightnesses, and thus nearby distances.

While not as useful as we had hoped for determining reddening, the color difference diagram does distinguish a few systems as being unusual. Figure 5 shows a few systems at large horizontal distances from the main-sequence curve, such as V1044 Her whose \( E(V-I_c) \) value from the color difference diagram is about 0.9. The question is whether that is caused by large interstellar reddening, or something else, such as a luminous companion. Looking at the expected reddening from the neutral hydrogen column density provides a clue.

Predehl & Schmitt (1995) used ROSAT observations to determine the relationship between X-ray absorption and optical extinction. Again assuming \( R_V = 3.1 \), their results show that \( E(B-V) = 1.8 \times 10^{-22} \times N_{\text{H}} \). To compute the \( N_{\text{H}} \) value for individual systems, we used the “nh” tool in the “heasarc” sub-package of the FTOOLS software available from the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center.

While this approach to estimating the reddening does not suffer the same problems as the color difference method, it does have potential problems. The main issue is that the \( N_{\text{H}} \) column density is estimated by interpolating between the approximately 0.5 sampling points of the \( N_{\text{H}} \) surveys as described in the software documentation. Caution must be exercised in using this method in areas where there are inhomogeneities in the interstellar medium on the scale of the interpolation. With that caveat in mind, we can compute the reddening and compare it to the value from the color difference method.

In the case of V1044 Her, we find that the value of \( E(B-V) \) estimated from the \( N_{\text{H}} \) column density is 0.05, while \( E(B-V) \) from the color difference method is 0.58. In order for the color difference value to be correct, the system would have to have a \( (B-V)_0 \) value of about 0.34, making it an early F-type star, but its orbital period of about 0.24 days precludes a spectral type that early. In this case, the reddening estimate based on the \( N_{\text{H}} \) column density seems much more reasonable, but that leaves unanswered the question of why the \( B-V \) value, implying \( T_{\text{eff}} \approx 5000 \text{ K} \), and the \( V-I_c \) value, implying \( T_{\text{eff}} \approx 4300 \text{ K} \), are so disparate. The \( V-R_c \) and \( R-I_c \) values, 0.69 and 0.60, respectively, are consistent with the \( V-I \) value, implying that the \( B-V \) value is too blue. The system was measured on three nights within a week of one another, and the three \( B-V \) values were consistent with one another, with values of 0.91, 0.92, and 0.92. The images show no obvious problems and the unfiltered light curve of Blattler & Diethelm (2001) does not appear to have large amounts of third light, so the reason for the disparity remains unclear. Perhaps the system is more active than usual, leading to elevated brightness in the \( B \) filter. Being one of only a few known systems with an orbital period less than 0.25 days, further observational study of V1044 Her is warranted.

The \( N_{\text{H}} \) method occasionally produces reddening values that are very large compared to the color difference method.

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Figure 4. Error in \( B-V \) vs. \( B-V \) for all systems in the survey.

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7 Available at http://heasarc.gsfc.nasa.gov/lheasoft/ftools/heasarc.html.
One example is V1191 Cyg whose $E(B - V)$ from the color difference method is 0.05 while the $N_{HI}$ method yields a value of 1.13. This difference is not very surprising since Cygnus lies along the galactic plane and large inhomogeneities in the interstellar medium are to be expected. Because of the weaknesses of each method, the safest approach is to trust only reddening values where the two methods are in good agreement. There are 321 systems that have equal values within the error bars, with the error in the $N_{HI}$ method assumed to be 0.02 mag. However, of those, many have fairly large errors in the values from the color difference method, with many having errors significantly larger than the value itself. To generate a more useful list, we further culled the list by eliminating systems where the difference between the two methods was 0.02 mag or less. This culling leaves 101 systems where the reddening values between the two methods are consistent. Table 2 shows how the values compare for these 101 systems.

Figure 6 shows the period–color relation for the systems in Table 2 along with the systems from Rucinski (1997b) with periods less than 0.6 days. The solid line is the short-period blue envelope (SPBE) from Rucinski (1998). V523 Cas is one of several systems bluer than the SPBE and is discussed in the text.
not overcontact systems, systems with a blue companion or they may be systems where our estimate of the reddening is too large. In the case of V523 Cas (whose overcontact nature appears solidly established), Samec et al. (2004) find large. In the case of V523 Cas (whose overcontact nature appears solidly established), Samec et al. (2004) find large. In the case of V523 Cas (whose overcontact nature appears solidly established), Samec et al. (2004) find large. In the case of V523 Cas (whose overcontact nature appears solidly established), Samec et al. (2004) find large. In the case of V523 Cas (whose overcontact nature appears solidly established), Samec et al. (2004) find large. In the case of V523 Cas (whose overcontact nature appears solidly established), Samec et al. (2004) find large. In the case of V523 Cas (whose overcontact nature appears solidly established), Samec et al. (2004) find large. 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