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Search for high-energy neutrino emission from hard X-ray AGN with IceCube

The IceCube Collaboration

(a complete list of authors can be found at the end of the proceedings)

E-mail: sgoswami2@crimson.ua.edu, jmsantander@ua.edu

Active Galactic Nuclei (AGN) are powerful astronomical objects with very high luminosities. Theoretical arguments suggest that these objects are capable of accelerating particles to energies of 10^{20} eV. In environments with matter or photon targets, cosmic-ray interactions transpire leading to the production of pionic gamma rays and neutrinos. Since the AGN environment is rich in gas, dust and photons, they are promising candidate sources of high-energy astrophysical neutrinos. While the neutrinos manage to escape, the gamma rays may further interact and cascade down to hard X-rays in environments with sufficiently large photon or gas targets. We have used 12 years of IceCube data to perform a stacked search and a point source search for high-energy neutrino emission from hard X-ray AGN sampled from *Swift*-BAT Spectroscopic Survey (BASS) and present the results of these two analyses.

Corresponding authors: Sreetama Goswami^{1*}, Marcos Santander¹, James DeLaunay¹, George C. Privon²

¹ *The University of Alabama*

² *NRAO*

* Presenter

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1. Introduction

Active Galactic Nuclei (AGN) are one of the most luminous astronomical objects in the entire Universe emitting vast amounts of energy spread over a large range of frequencies [see reviews for e.g. 1, 2]. As the name suggests, these are the nuclei of active galaxies that are observed with extreme levels of radiation from the core region as compared to other regular galaxies. The basic structure of AGN consists of a supermassive black hole (SMBH) surrounded by an accretion disk. This central region is enveloped by a roughly torus-shaped structure rich in dust and gas known as the dusty torus. AGN may also be accompanied by a relativistic and highly collimated jet. The class of AGN with jets directed towards the Earth having an angle of less than $\sim 15^\circ$ with respect to the line of sight are blazars. The blazars are observed with a high luminosity that is believed to originate from relativistic beaming effects as the ionized plasma in the jets of blazars point towards the observer [3].

AGN have the potential ability to accelerate charged particles to ultra-high energies of about 10^{20} eV [4]. There exist suggestions in the literature of AGN being promising sources of neutrinos [5–7]. Within the AGN environment, the accelerated particles may undergo interactions and lead to a production of neutral and charged pions that upon decay produce neutrinos and gamma rays. There exists evidence of possible neutrino emission from individual AGN, i.e., TXS 0506+056 [8] and NGC 1068 [9]. However, searches aimed at finding neutrino emission from a class of sources bright in gamma rays have found no significant correlation [see for e.g., 10, 11]. Theoretical models have thus suggested that the sources of high-energy neutrinos are possibly hidden and opaque to gamma rays [7]. The models propose that the pionic gamma rays produced in the AGN environments may further interact with ambient photons and cascade down to a flux of MeV gamma rays or hard X-rays [12, 13]. We perform two analyses to search for neutrino emissions from AGN that are observed in the hard X-ray regime of the 14 - 195 keV energy band.

2. Neutrino data and the catalog

The IceCube Neutrino Observatory is a neutrino telescope at the South Pole that uses a cubic kilometer of instrumented ice to detect and characterize astrophysical neutrinos [14]. IceCube has reported the observation of diffuse fluxes of neutrinos that can be approximated by a single power-law function [15, 16]. We have chosen a neutrino dataset consisting of 12 years of muon neutrino tracks from 2008 to 2020 that uses the same selection criteria used for the dataset with 10 years of data as described in 17. These muon tracks constitute an all-sky neutrino dataset with an angular resolution of $< 1^\circ$ at energies above 1 TeV [18].

Swift-BAT AGN Spectroscopic Survey¹, or the BASS catalog [19, 20], is a comprehensive selection of AGN compiled from the sources reported in the 70-month *Swift*-BAT all-sky hard X-ray survey [21]. It is an all-sky and the most complete list of AGN detected in the energy regime of 14 - 195 keV (see Figure 1). It contains estimates of physical properties such as the distance, the intrinsic hard X-ray flux and the column density along the line of sight (N_H) and reports the type of AGN. We have selected 836 AGN from the BASS catalog DR-1 for this work. There are two additional sources in the BASS catalog, SWIFT J1119.5+5132 and SWIFT J1313.6+3650A.

¹The BASS project

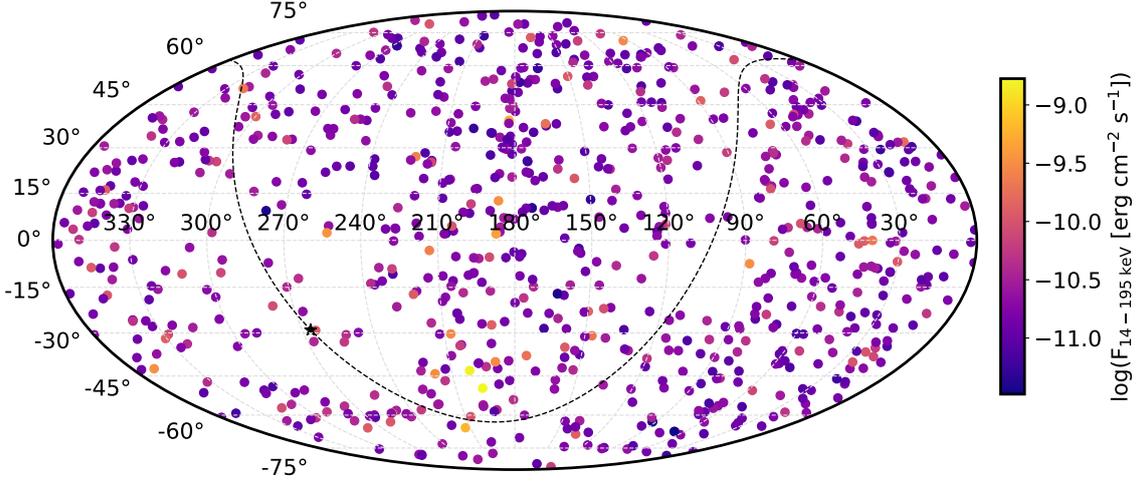


Figure 1: The skymap in equatorial coordinates showing the position of BASS sources and the color of each source represents the intrinsic hard X-ray flux (14 - 195 keV). The black dashed line shows the galactic plane and the black marker shown as a star represents the galactic center in the image.

They were excluded since the two sources did not have an estimate for the column density which is relevant to this study.

3. The Analyses

We have performed two analyses to search for evidence of neutrinos emitted by AGN detected in hard X-rays described as follows. The analyses are based on the statistical method of a time-integrated unbinned-likelihood hypothesis test [22, 23].

- *Stacked search:* In this analysis, we search for a correlation between neutrinos detected by IceCube and different classes of hard X-ray AGN. The AGN in the catalog can be classified as follows: first, according to the type of AGN into two classes: (i) non-blazar AGN (732) and (ii) blazars (104), and second, according to the estimated value of column density into three classes, (i) unobscured sources with $N_{\text{H}} < 10^{22} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ (457), (ii) obscured sources with $10^{22} \text{ cm}^{-2} < N_{\text{H}} < 10^{24} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ (323) and (iii) Compton-thick sources with $N_{\text{H}} > 10^{24} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ (56). We search for cumulative neutrino emissions from all the 836 AGN in our catalog and from each of the five classes mentioned above by stacking the sources in each class [see for e.g. 24]. It is assumed that the neutrino flux is correlated with the intrinsic hard X-ray flux and therefore, each source carries a theoretical weight proportional to the intrinsic hard X-ray flux. We use the values of intrinsic X-ray fluxes for the sources as reported in the BASS catalog where the authors correct the observed fluxes for absorption to obtain intrinsic fluxes [19, 20]. An additional case is tested using equal weighting for all AGN in the catalog. This is for comparison purposes with the other six hypotheses tested.
- *Point Source Search:* In this analysis, we draw a shorter list of 43 sources that are the most promising sources of neutrinos based on their higher hard X-ray flux and location in the sky

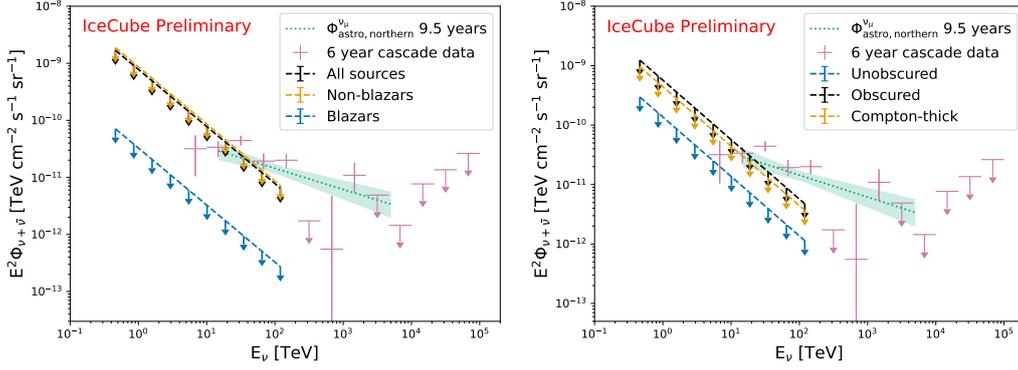


Figure 2: The figures show the 90% CL flux upper limits obtained from the different AGN classes tested in the stacking analysis. Left: Right: The fluxes obtained from the analysis have been scaled to include the AGN that remain undetected and thus not in the current catalog. This scaling is done using catalog completeness factors computed for each class of AGN.

that is favorable to detection. We have searched for neutrino emissions from these individual point-like sources.

4. Results

From the stacked search, we do not find evidence of significant emission from any of the seven hypotheses tested. Therefore, we have calculated the 90% confidence level (CL) flux upper limits for the source classes. In Figure 2 (left), we show the flux upper limits obtained from all 836 AGN, the 732 non-blazar AGN and the 104 blazars and in Figure 2 (right), we show the flux upper limits obtained from the 457 unobscured AGN, 323 obscured AGN and the 56 Compton-thick AGN. For comparison purposes, we have additionally shown the all-sky diffuse fluxes of neutrinos obtained by IceCube using the muon neutrino tracks in dotted light blue line [16] and using the cascades originating mostly from electron and tau neutrinos in pink [15]. The fluxes for each class of AGN in the figure are representative of all the AGN in the Universe belonging to that class after catalog completeness correction. The catalog completeness fraction for each AGN class is the ratio of neutrinos emitted by AGN in the catalog and the total neutrino contribution from the entire source population. We have used luminosity functions from blazars [25] and non-blazar AGN [26] and integrated them over all redshift to find the total neutrino flux.

From the point source search, the top two sources that result in the highest levels of significance are NGC 1068 and NGC 4151. A previous analysis reported the observation on NGC 1068 [9] and the results of this analysis are compatible with the evidence previously found.

Figure 3 shows the local probability around the location of the two most significant sources obtained from the point source search.

5. Conclusion

Using the flux upper limit obtained from the stacked search, we evaluate the contribution of blazars toward the total diffuse flux of astrophysical neutrinos using muon tracks reported by

IceCube and at 100 TeV, it is at a maximum 7%. From the results of this work, we cannot comment on the contribution from the non-blazar AGN or all hard X-ray AGN in the catalog due to the flux upper limits being non-constraining of the total neutrino flux from muon neutrino tracks.

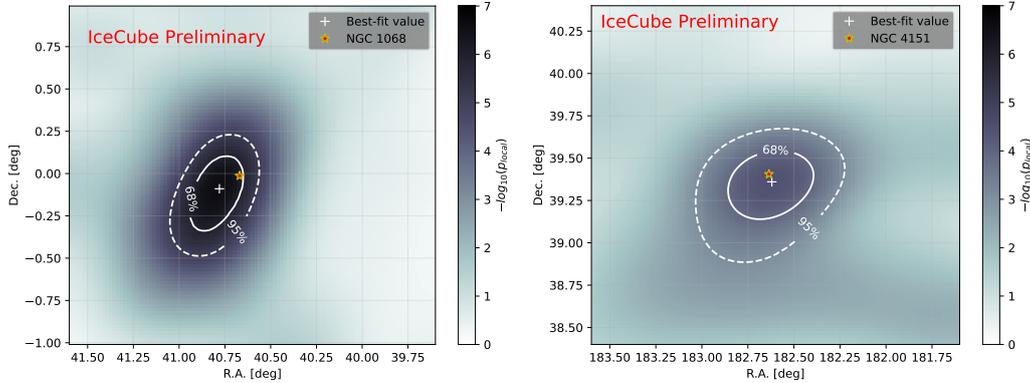


Figure 3: A scan of the region around the location of Right: NGC 4151 and Left: NGC 1068, showing the local p -values. The white cross shows the location of the best-fit position obtained from the point source search and the red star shows the location of the source as obtained from the catalog. The white unbroken and dashed lines show the 68% and the 95% contour lines, respectively, around the sources computed using Wilk’s theorem [27].

The sources found in the point source analysis with the highest significance are Seyfert galaxies that are highly obscured. NGC 1068 has been reported in a previous IceCube study and hence, not considered in the final estimation of the significance evaluation. NGC 4151 is observed at a significance level of 2.9σ .

From the stacking analysis, we do not find any evidence of significant neutrino emission from any of the hard X-ray AGN classes tested but the second analysis where we searched for emission from individual sources resulted in two sources showing potential neutrino emission. Assuming the observed excess from the two sources as a neutrino signal, we see that their spectra are softer with a best fit spectral index of ~ 3 compared to the diffuse fluxes observed by IceCube with a spectral index closer to 2.5. This shows that the source class responsible for the bulk of the diffuse neutrino flux should have a harder spectrum than the sources found in this analysis.

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Full Author List: IceCube Collaboration

R. Abbasi¹⁷, M. Ackermann⁶³, J. Adams¹⁸, S. K. Agarwalla^{40, 64}, J. A. Aguilar¹², M. Ahlers²², J.M. Alameddine²³, N. M. Amin⁴⁴, K. Andeen⁴², G. Anton²⁶, C. Argüelles¹⁴, Y. Ashida⁵³, S. Athanasiadou⁶³, S. N. Axani⁴⁴, X. Bai⁵⁰, A. Balagopal V.⁴⁰, M. Baricevic⁴⁰, S. W. Barwick³⁰, V. Basu⁴⁰, R. Bay⁸, J. J. Beatty^{20, 21}, J. Becker Tjus^{11, 65}, J. Beise⁶¹, C. Bellenghi²⁷, C. Benning¹, S. BenZvi⁵², D. Berley¹⁹, E. Bernardini⁴⁸, D. Z. Besson³⁶, E. Blaufuss¹⁹, S. Blot⁶³, F. Bontempo³¹, J. Y. Book¹⁴, C. Boscolo Meneguolo⁴⁸, S. Böser⁴¹, O. Botner⁶¹, J. Böttcher⁴, E. Bourbeau²², J. Braun⁴⁰, B. Brinson⁶, J. Brostean-Kaiser⁶³, R. T. Burley², R. S. Busse⁴³, D. Butterfield⁴⁰, M. A. Campana⁴⁹, K. Carloni¹⁴, E. G. Carnie-Bronca², S. Chattopadhyay^{40, 64}, N. Chau¹², C. Chen⁶, Z. Chen⁵⁵, D. Chirkin⁴⁰, S. Choi⁵⁶, B. A. Clark¹⁹, L. Classen⁴³, A. Coleman⁶¹, G. H. Collin¹⁵, A. Connolly^{20, 21}, J. M. Conrad¹⁵, P. Coppin¹³, P. Correa¹³, D. F. Cowen^{59, 60}, P. Dave⁶, C. De Clercq¹³, J. J. DeLaunay⁵⁸, D. Delgado¹⁴, S. Deng¹, K. Deoskar⁵⁴, A. Desai⁴⁰, P. Desiati⁴⁰, K. D. de Vries¹³, G. de Wasseige³⁷, T. DeYoung²⁴, A. Diaz¹⁵, J. C. Díaz-Vélez⁴⁰, M. Dittmer⁴³, A. Domi²⁶, H. Dujmovic⁴⁰, M. A. DuVernois⁴⁰, T. Ehrhardt⁴¹, P. Eller²⁷, E. Ellinger⁶², S. El Mentawi¹, D. Elsässer²³, R. Engel^{31, 32}, H. Erpenbeck⁴⁰, J. Evans¹⁹, P. A. Evenson⁴⁴, K. L. Fan¹⁹, K. Fang⁴⁰, K. Farrag¹⁶, A. R. Fazley⁷, A. Fedynitch⁵⁷, N. Feigl¹⁰, S. Fiedlschuster²⁶, C. Finley⁵⁴, L. Fischer⁶³, D. Fox⁵⁹, A. Frackowiak¹¹, A. Fritz⁴¹, P. Fürst¹, J. Gallagher³⁹, E. Ganster¹, A. Garcia¹⁴, L. Gerhardt⁹, A. Ghadimi⁵⁸, C. Glaser⁶¹, T. Glauch²⁷, T. Glusenkamp^{26, 61}, N. Goehke³², J. G. Gonzalez⁴⁴, S. Goswami⁵⁸, D. Grant²⁴, S. J. Gray¹⁹, O. Gries¹, S. Griffin⁴⁰, S. Griswold⁵², K. M. Groth²², C. Günther¹, P. Gutjahr²³, C. Haack²⁶, A. Hallgren⁶¹, R. Halliday²⁴, L. Halve¹, F. Halzen⁴⁰, H. Hamdaoui⁵⁵, M. Ha Minh²⁷, K. Hanson⁴⁰, J. Hardin¹⁵, A. A. Harnisch²⁴, P. Hatch³³, A. Haungs³¹, K. Helbing⁶², J. Hellrung¹¹, F. Henningsen²⁷, L. Heuermann¹, N. Heyer⁶¹, S. Hickford⁶², A. Hivvegi⁵⁴, C. Hill¹⁶, G. C. Hill², K. D. Hoffman¹⁹, S. Hori⁴⁰, K. Hoshina^{40, 66}, W. Hou³¹, T. Huber³¹, K. Hultqvist⁵⁴, M. Hünnefeld²³, R. Hussain⁴⁰, K. Hymon²³, S. In⁵⁶, A. Ishihara¹⁶, M. Jacquart⁴⁰, O. Janik¹, M. Jansson⁵⁴, G. S. Japaridze⁵, M. Jeong⁵⁶, M. Jin¹⁴, B. J. P. Jones⁴, D. Kang³¹, W. Kang⁵⁶, X. Kang⁴⁹, A. Kappes⁴³, D. Kappesser⁴¹, L. Kardum²³, T. Karg⁶³, M. Kar²⁷, A. Karle⁴⁰, U. Katz²⁶, M. Kauer⁴⁰, J. L. Kelley⁴⁰, A. Khatee Zathul⁴⁰, A. Kheirandish^{34, 35}, J. Kiryluk⁵⁵, S. R. Klein^{8, 9}, A. Kochocki²⁴, R. Koirala⁴⁴, H. Kolanoski¹⁰, T. Kontrimas²⁷, L. Köpke⁴¹, C. Kopper²⁶, D. J. Koskinen²², P. Koundal³¹, M. Kovacevich⁴⁹, M. Kowalski^{10, 63}, T. Kozynets²², J. Krishnamoorthi^{40, 64}, K. Kruiswijk³⁷, E. Krupczak²⁴, A. Kumar⁶³, E. Kun¹¹, N. Kurahashi⁴⁹, N. Lad⁶³, C. Lagunas Gualda⁶³, M. Lamoureux³⁷, M. J. Larson¹⁹, S. Latseva¹, F. Lauber⁶², J. P. Lazar^{14, 40}, J. W. Lee⁵⁶, K. Leonard DeHolton⁶⁰, A. Leszczyńska⁴⁴, M. Lincetto¹¹, Q. R. Liu⁴⁰, M. Liubarska²⁵, E. Lohfink⁴¹, C. Love⁴⁹, C. J. Lozano Mariscal⁴³, L. Lu⁴⁰, F. Lucarelli²⁸, W. Luszczak^{20, 21}, Y. Lyu^{8, 9}, J. Madsen⁴⁰, K. B. M. Mahn²⁴, Y. Makino⁴⁰, E. Manao²⁷, S. Mancina^{40, 48}, W. Marie Sainte⁴⁰, I. C. Mariš¹², S. Marka⁴⁶, Z. Marka⁴⁶, M. Marsee⁵⁸, I. Martinez-Soler¹⁴, R. Maruyama⁴⁵, F. Mayhew²⁴, T. McElroy²⁵, F. McNally³⁸, J. V. Mead²², K. Meagher⁴⁰, S. Mechbal⁶³, A. Medina²¹, M. Meier¹⁶, Y. Merckx¹³, L. Merten¹¹, J. Micallef²⁴, J. Mitchell⁷, T. Montaruli²⁸, R. W. Moore²⁵, Y. Morii¹⁶, R. Morse⁴⁰, M. Moulai⁴⁰, T. Mukherjee³¹, R. Naab⁶³, R. Nagai¹⁶, M. Nakos⁴⁰, U. Naumann⁶², J. Necker⁶³, A. Negi⁴, M. Neumann⁴³, H. Niederhausen²⁴, M. U. Nisa²⁴, A. Noell¹, A. Novikov⁴⁴, S. C. Nowicki²⁴, A. Obertacke Pollmann¹⁶, V. O'Dell⁴⁰, M. Oehler³¹, B. Oeyen²⁹, A. Olivas¹⁹, R. Ørsøe²⁷, J. Osborn⁴⁰, E. O'Sullivan⁶¹, H. Pandya⁴⁴, N. Park³³, G. K. Parker⁴, E. N. Paudel⁴⁴, L. Paul^{42, 50}, C. Pérez de los Heros⁶¹, J. Peterson⁴⁰, S. Philippen¹, A. Pizzuto⁴⁰, M. Plum⁵⁰, A. Pontén⁶¹, Y. Popovych⁴¹, M. Prado Rodriguez⁴⁰, B. Pries²⁴, G. C. Privon^{67, 68}, R. Procter-Murphy¹⁹, G. T. Przybylski⁹, C. Raab³⁷, J. Rack-Helleis⁴¹, K. Rawlins³, Z. Rechav⁴⁰, A. Rehman⁴⁴, P. Reichherzer¹¹, G. Renzi¹², E. Resconi²⁷, S. Reusch⁶³, W. Rhode²³, B. Riedel⁴⁰, A. Rifaie¹, E. J. Roberts², S. Robertson^{8, 9}, S. Rodan⁵⁶, G. Roellinghoff⁵⁶, M. Rongen²⁶, C. Rott^{53, 56}, T. Ruhe²³, L. Ruohan²⁷, D. Ryckbosch²⁹, I. Safa^{14, 40}, J. Saffer³², D. Salazar-Gallegos²⁴, P. Sampathkumar³¹, S. E. Sanchez Herrera²⁴, A. Sandrock⁶², M. Santander⁵⁸, S. Sarkar²⁵, S. Sarkar⁴⁷, J. Savelberg¹, P. Savina⁴⁰, M. Schaufel¹, H. Schieler³¹, S. Schindler²⁶, L. Schlickmann¹, B. Schlüter⁴³, F. Schlüter¹², N. Schmeisser⁶², T. Schmidt¹⁹, J. Schneider²⁶, F. G. Schröder^{31, 44}, L. Schumacher²⁶, G. Schwefer¹, S. Sclafani¹⁹, D. Seckel⁴⁴, M. Seikh³⁶, S. Seunarine⁵¹, R. Shah⁴⁹, A. Sharma⁶¹, S. Shefali³², N. Shimizu¹⁶, M. Silva⁴⁰, B. Skrzypek¹⁴, B. Smithers⁴, R. Snihur⁴⁰, J. Soedingrekso²³, A. Sogaard²², D. Soldin³², P. Soldin¹, G. Sommani¹¹, C. Spannfellner²⁷, G. M. Spiczak⁵¹, C. Spiering⁶³, M. Stamatikos²¹, T. Stanev⁴⁴, T. Stetzelberger⁹, T. Stürwald⁶², T. Stuttard²², G. W. Sullivan¹⁹, I. Taboada⁶, S. Ter-Antonyan⁷, M. Thiesmeyer¹, W. G. Thompson¹⁴, J. Thwaites⁴⁰, S. Tilav⁴⁴, K. Tollefson²⁴, C. Tönnis⁵⁶, S. Toscano¹², D. Tosi⁴⁰, A. Trettin⁶³, C. F. Tung⁶, R. Turcotte³¹, J. P. Twagirayezu²⁴, B. Ty⁴⁰, M. A. Unland Elorrieta⁴³, A. K. Upadhyay^{40, 64}, K. Upshaw⁷, N. Valtonen-Mattila⁶¹, J. Vandenbroucke⁴⁰, N. van Eijndhoven¹³, D. Vannerom¹⁵, J. van Santen⁶³, J. Vara⁴³, J. Veitch-Michaelis⁴⁰, M. Venugopal³¹, M. Vereecken³⁷, S. Verpoest⁴⁴, D. Veske⁴⁶, A. Vijai¹⁹, C. Walck⁵⁴, C. Weaver²⁴, P. Weigel¹⁵, A. Weindl³¹, J. Weldert⁶⁰, C. Wendt⁴⁰, J. Werthebach²³, M. Weyrauch³¹, N. Whitehorn²⁴, C. H. Wiebusch¹, N. Willey²⁴, D. R. Williams⁵⁸, L. Witthaus²³, A. Wolf¹, M. Wolf²⁷, G. Wrede²⁶, X. W. Xu⁷, J. P. Yanez²⁵, E. Yildizci⁴⁰, S. Yoshida¹⁶, R. Young³⁶, F. Yu¹⁴, S. Yu²⁴, T. Yuan⁴⁰, Z. Zhang⁵⁵, P. Zhelmin¹⁴, M. Zimmerman⁴⁰

¹ III. Physikalisches Institut, RWTH Aachen University, D-52056 Aachen, Germany

² Department of Physics, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, 5005, Australia

³ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Alaska Anchorage, 3211 Providence Dr., Anchorage, AK 99508, USA

⁴ Dept. of Physics, University of Texas at Arlington, 502 Yates St., Science Hall Rm 108, Box 19059, Arlington, TX 76019, USA

⁵ CTSPS, Clark-Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA 30314, USA

⁶ School of Physics and Center for Relativistic Astrophysics, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332, USA

⁷ Dept. of Physics, Southern University, Baton Rouge, LA 70813, USA

⁸ Dept. of Physics, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

⁹ Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

¹⁰ Institut für Physik, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, D-12489 Berlin, Germany

¹¹ Fakultät für Physik & Astronomie, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, D-44780 Bochum, Germany

¹² Université Libre de Bruxelles, Science Faculty CP230, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium

- ¹³ Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Dienst ELEM, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium
¹⁴ Department of Physics and Laboratory for Particle Physics and Cosmology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
¹⁵ Dept. of Physics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA
¹⁶ Dept. of Physics and The International Center for Hadron Astrophysics, Chiba University, Chiba 263-8522, Japan
¹⁷ Department of Physics, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL 60660, USA
¹⁸ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, New Zealand
¹⁹ Dept. of Physics, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA
²⁰ Dept. of Astronomy, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, USA
²¹ Dept. of Physics and Center for Cosmology and Astro-Particle Physics, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, USA
²² Niels Bohr Institute, University of Copenhagen, DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark
²³ Dept. of Physics, TU Dortmund University, D-44221 Dortmund, Germany
²⁴ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA
²⁵ Dept. of Physics, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2E1
²⁶ Erlangen Centre for Astroparticle Physics, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, D-91058 Erlangen, Germany
²⁷ Technical University of Munich, TUM School of Natural Sciences, Department of Physics, D-85748 Garching bei München, Germany
²⁸ Département de physique nucléaire et corpusculaire, Université de Genève, CH-1211 Genève, Switzerland
²⁹ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Gent, B-9000 Gent, Belgium
³⁰ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697, USA
³¹ Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Institute for Astroparticle Physics, D-76021 Karlsruhe, Germany
³² Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Institute of Experimental Particle Physics, D-76021 Karlsruhe, Germany
³³ Dept. of Physics, Engineering Physics, and Astronomy, Queen's University, Kingston, ON K7L 3N6, Canada
³⁴ Department of Physics & Astronomy, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV, 89154, USA
³⁵ Nevada Center for Astrophysics, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV 89154, USA
³⁶ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA
³⁷ Centre for Cosmology, Particle Physics and Phenomenology - CP3, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
³⁸ Department of Physics, Mercer University, Macon, GA 31207-0001, USA
³⁹ Dept. of Astronomy, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI 53706, USA
⁴⁰ Dept. of Physics and Wisconsin IceCube Particle Astrophysics Center, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI 53706, USA
⁴¹ Institute of Physics, University of Mainz, Staudinger Weg 7, D-55099 Mainz, Germany
⁴² Department of Physics, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, 53201, USA
⁴³ Institut für Kernphysik, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, D-48149 Münster, Germany
⁴⁴ Bartol Research Institute and Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, USA
⁴⁵ Dept. of Physics, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520, USA
⁴⁶ Columbia Astrophysics and Nevis Laboratories, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, USA
⁴⁷ Dept. of Physics, University of Oxford, Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PU, United Kingdom
⁴⁸ Dipartimento di Fisica e Astronomia Galileo Galilei, Università Degli Studi di Padova, 35122 Padova PD, Italy
⁴⁹ Dept. of Physics, Drexel University, 3141 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA
⁵⁰ Physics Department, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, Rapid City, SD 57701, USA
⁵¹ Dept. of Physics, University of Wisconsin, River Falls, WI 54022, USA
⁵² Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627, USA
⁵³ Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA
⁵⁴ Oskar Klein Centre and Dept. of Physics, Stockholm University, SE-10691 Stockholm, Sweden
⁵⁵ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY 11794-3800, USA
⁵⁶ Dept. of Physics, Sungkyunkwan University, Suwon 16419, Korea
⁵⁷ Institute of Physics, Academia Sinica, Taipei, 11529, Taiwan
⁵⁸ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA
⁵⁹ Dept. of Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA
⁶⁰ Dept. of Physics, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA
⁶¹ Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, Uppsala University, Box 516, S-75120 Uppsala, Sweden
⁶² Dept. of Physics, University of Wuppertal, D-42119 Wuppertal, Germany
⁶³ Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY, Platanenallee 6, 15738 Zeuthen, Germany
⁶⁴ Institute of Physics, Sachivalaya Marg, Sainik School Post, Bhubaneswar 751005, India
⁶⁵ Department of Space, Earth and Environment, Chalmers University of Technology, 412 96 Gothenburg, Sweden
⁶⁶ Earthquake Research Institute, University of Tokyo, Bunkyo, Tokyo 113-0032, Japan
⁶⁷ North American ALMA Science Center, National Radio Astronomy Observatory, Charlottesville, VA 22903, USA
⁶⁸ Department of Astronomy, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

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