A Dark Energy Camera Search for an Optical Counterpart to the First Advanced Ligo Gravitational Wave Event Gw150914

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A DARK ENERGY CAMERA SEARCH FOR AN OPTICAL COUNTERPART TO THE FIRST ADVANCED LIGO GRAVITATIONAL WAVE EVENT GW150914


(The DES Collaboration)

ABSTRACT

We report initial results of a deep search for an optical counterpart to the gravitational wave event GW150914, the first trigger from the Advanced LIGO gravitational wave detectors. We used the Dark Energy Camera (DECam) to image a 102 deg2 area, corresponding to 38% of the initial trigger high-probability sky region and to 11% of the revised high-probability region. We observed in i and z bands at 4–5, 7, and 24 days after the trigger. The median 5σ point-source limiting magnitudes of our search images are $i = 22.5$ and $z = 21.8$ mag. We processed the images through a difference-imaging pipeline using templates from pre-existing Dark Energy Survey data and publicly available DECam data. Due to missing template observations and other losses, our effective search area subtends 40 deg2, corresponding to 12% total probability in the initial map and 3% of the final map. In this area, we search for objects that decline significantly between days 4–5 and day 7, and are undetectable by day 24, finding none to typical magnitude limits of $i = 21.5, 21.1, 20.1$ for object colors $(i - z) = 1, 0, -1$, respectively. Our search demonstrates the feasibility of a dedicated search program with DECam and bodes well for future research in this emerging field.

Subject headings: binaries: close — catalogs — gravitational waves — stars: neutron — surveys
1. INTRODUCTION

The advanced network of ground-based gravitational wave (GW) interferometers is designed to detect and study GW emission from events such as the mergers of binary systems composed of neutron stars and/or black holes to distances of hundreds of Mpc (see Abbott et al. (2013) and references therein). In mergers containing at least one neutron star, counterpart electromagnetic radiation is expected, potentially ranging from a short-duration gamma-ray burst through optical/near-IR emission from the radioactive decay of r-process nuclei to radio emission from ejecta interacting with the circumbinary medium (e.g., Li & Paczyński 1998; Nakar & Piran 2011; Metzger & Berger 2012; Barnes & Kasen 2013; Tanaka & Hotokezaka 2013; Tanaka et al. 2014; Aasi et al. 2014; Berger 2014; Cowperthwaite & Berger 2015). The detection of an electromagnetic counterpart will provide critical insight into the physics of the event, helping to determine the distance scale, energy scale, and the progenitor environment, as well as insight into the behavior of matter post-merger (e.g., the production of jets and outflows).

With this motivation, we recently began an observational program using the wide-field Dark Energy Camera (DECam; Flaugher et al. 2015) on the Blanco 4-m telescope at Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory to search for optical counterparts to GW triggers from the new advanced GW detectors (LIGO, Abbott et al. 2009; Virgo, Acernese et al. 2009). This program was awarded three target of opportunity nights to observe LIGO-triggered events during the 2015B semester; observations were coordinated with and managed by the Dark Energy Survey (DES). Our program is optimized for detection of kilonovae, the hypothesized optical counterparts of mergers involving neutron stars, which would appear as red transients with expected decay timescale of about a week (for an overview of our program see Abbott et al. 2016b).

On 2015 September 14 at 09:50:45 UT the Advanced LIGO interferometer network detected a high significance candidate GW event designated GW150914 (Abbott et al. 2016) and two days later provided spatial location information in the form of probability sky maps via a private GCN circular (#18330; Singer et al. 2015). We initiated observations with DECam, a 3 deg$^2$ field-of-view instrument, on 2015 September 18 in an effort to identify an optical counterpart. Here we describe the observations and provide the results of the three-epoch search. These DECam observations are the deepest search for an optical counterpart to GW event GW150914 (Abbott et al. 2016a).

2. DECam Observations of GW150914

The detection of GW150914 was triggered by the cWB (coherent WaveBurst; Klimentenko et al. 2008) unmodeled burst analysis during real-time data processing. On 2015 September 16, the LIGO Virgo Collaboration (LVC) provided two all-sky localization probability maps for the event, generated from the cWB and LALInferenceBurst

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DECam Search for an Optical Counterpart to GW150914

2.1. Observing Strategy

We chose the location and sequence of DECam observations using an automated observing strategy algorithm. The algorithm utilizes the GW localization map, an estimate of the event distance, and a model of the expected optical emission (e.g., Barnes & Kasen 2013). This information is folded in with observational information, including a map of sky brightness (using the DES sky brightness model; Neilsen 2012), the atmospheric transmission (using information on airmass and the interstellar dust extinction from Planck; Abergel et al. 2014), the expected seeing (from scaling laws with airmass and wavelength), and the confusion-limit probability (based on stellar density maps) to produce a full source-detection probability as a function of sky location. We used this map to observe the highest probability region that included area both inside and outside the DES footprint.

In the case of GW150914 the localization region intersected the Large Magellanic Cloud (LMC), so we designed a separate set of short observations to observe the brightest LMC stars. We obtained 5-sec i and z band exposures covering 18 deg$^2$ centered on the LMC on 2015 September 18 and 27. This shallower data set was used to search for a potential failed supernova in the LMC; the results are reported in a separate paper (Annis et al. 2016). Figure 1 shows a sky map computed for the end of the first night of observations, zoomed in to the region of interest and detailing the fields observed in each of the three epochs in red.

![Fig. 1.— The color image shows the estimated limiting point-source magnitude for a 90-sec i band exposure as a function of sky position for our first night of DECam observations just before sunrise. In this area and for this time of night, the variations are mostly due to interstellar dust extinction. The dotted contours show the initial (September 2015) skyprobcc_cWB_complete map, while the solid contours are for the final (January 2016) LALInference_skyprobmap. There is an island of significant probability in the Northern hemisphere in the skyprobcc_cWB_complete map, not present in the LALInference_skyprobmap, so the dotted contours do not show the complete 50% or 90% areas. The hexagonal DECam fields observed are shown, with red for the main search and orange for the short exposure LMC data. Fields located on the west (left) side of the region of interest overlap with the DES area (footprint boundary shown in light-gold). The excluded region (dark grey) is beyond the horizon limit that could be observed with DECam at that time. The total area inside the camera pointings is about 102 deg$^2$. We covered about 11% of the total localization probability in the final map, and 38% of the initial map. The projection shown is an equal-area McBryde-Thomas flat-polar quartic projection.](image-url)

2.2. Image Processing

Our data analysis relies on subtracting earlier template images from the science images taken for this program. In the area that overlaps the DES footprint (25% of the total), we used DES images from the first two seasons of the survey as templates. In the 75% of the area outside of the DES footprint, we used publicly available DECam data from the NOAO Science Archive (portal-nvo.noao.edu), requiring exposures of at least 30 sec in i and z bands.

We processed the DECam search and template images using the DES Data Management single-epoch image processing software (Desai et al. 2012; Mohr et al. 2012; Sevilla et al. 2011; Gruendl et al. 2016). Its output images were used as input to the difference imaging pipeline, which we developed from the DES Supernova pipeline (Kessler et al. 2015). The main adaptation of the pipeline for our purposes was to generalize to the case of search and template images with arbitrary relative alignment. A candidate requires two SExtractor (Bertin & Arnouts 1996) detections in the first epoch in both i and z bands. To reduce the large number of detected artifacts, each detection must satisfy quality requirements...
into a single weighted-average flux: 

in conditions as well. The fakes were in all the images we pro-

z ≈ 22

21

z 1 and

z 2

22

z 1

≈ −20%

z 22

z

10% loss arises

which

resulting in an effective area of 67.2 deg². In addition, 30% of the area is lost due to sparse availability of templates outside of the DES footprint. Another 10% loss arises from processing issues. This results in 40 deg² which were used in this analysis.

Based on an analysis of a sample of fake point sources injected into the images in this area, we find that the typical 80% source detection completeness in the subtracted images is at ≈ 22.1 and z ≈ 21.2 mag. In the first epoch, where the observing conditions were better, we achieve that level of completeness at i ≈ 22.7 and z ≈ 21.8, comparable to the 5σ point source depth for those images. The fakes were in all the images we processed, thus the completeness depth reflects the variation in conditions as well.

3. Analysis

While a BBH merger is not expected to result in an optical signature, it is nevertheless of interest to search for a possible optical counterpart. As our first epoch of observations occurred 4 days after the trigger, our prior on the search is that any candidate shall be fading slowly enough to be detectable 7 days after the event, but not 24 days after the event.

Of the 84 deg² area outside of the LMC, about 20% is lost due to camera fill-factor (see Table 1 for details) resulting in an effective area of 67.2 deg². In addition, 30% of the area is lost due to sparse availability of templates outside of the DES footprint. Another 10% loss arises from processing issues. This results in 40 deg² which were used in this analysis.

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3.1. Sample Selection

For the selection criteria described below, multiple observations per night (primarily in i band) are combined into a single weighted-average flux:

1. Second-epoch signal-to-noise ratio (S/N) above 2 in both i and z (to enable flux change determination with respect to the first epoch);
2. ≥ 3σ decline in both i and z fluxes from the first epoch to the second (to isolate fading sources; σ is defined by the quadrature sum of the flux errors in the first two epochs);
3. S/N ≤ 3σ in both i and z third epoch (at 24 days post-trigger, to reject long-timescale transients such as supernovae).

3.2. Results

In Table 2 we show the impact of our selection criteria on the sample of candidates as a function of the first epoch i-band magnitude. The decaying light curve requirement has the most impact in reducing the sample size. None of the candidates pass all the selection criteria. The area analyzed, 40 deg², covers 3% of the localization probability in the final LALInference map (though it covered 12% in the initial cWB map).

To interpret these results some caveats are required. Because our selection criteria impose demands on significance in the second epoch, the actual first epoch search depth depends on the decline rate and i − z color of the source model. In addition, we have not yet accounted for the degraded sensitivity to candidates located in bright galaxies.

For a particular source model, we can estimate the search depth. We applied our selection criteria to a sample of fake sources randomly placed in our search images before processing with our difference imaging pipeline. The fakes have a constant decay rate of 0.3 mags/day and are red, with (i − z) ≈ 1, as expected from kilonova models. The magnitude at which we recover 50% of the fakes, m50%, is about 1 magnitude brighter than the 5σ point source limiting magnitude reported in Table 1, i.e., m50%−m5σ ≈ −1. Simulations with bluer models show that for sources with (i − z) = 0 the search depth is m50%−m5σ ≈ −1.4; for (i − z) = −1, the search depth is m50%−m5σ ≈ −2.4. We therefore achieve magnitude limit of i = 21.5, 21.1, 20.1 for object colors (i − z) = 1, 0, −1, respectively.

4. Conclusions

We presented our search for an optical counterpart to the first gravitational wave event, GW150914, using the wide-field DECam instrument. Our observations cover
102 deg$^2$ corresponding to 11% of the total probability map. The search images used in this analysis reach median 5σ point source depth of $i = 22.5$ and $z = 21.8$ mag. Our DECam/Blanco observations are the deepest optical follow-up for this GW event.

Using selection criteria which isolate fading transients over the analysis region covering 3% of the total localization probability, we find no candidate counterparts. We are still investigating improved background rejection criteria using information such as: matching against a galaxy catalog to remove transients associated with high-redshift galaxies, angular separation between $i$ and $z$ exposures to reduce asteroids, and detailed simulations of supernovae and source models to better optimize selection requirements as well as the search strategy for future events.

Although these results are not surprising given the partial areal coverage and the likely BBH merger nature of the event, our search is a crucial first step and demonstrates the viability of DECam for deep optical follow-up of GW events.

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TABLE 2

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