

Star Party Etiquette

The beginning guide to proper behavior at dark-sky star parties.
(Or - How to make sure you will be invited back again)

Observing Etiquette

Most amateur astronomers live in increasingly light-polluted environments and don't have the opportunity to observe from pristine dark sky locations nearly as much as they would like. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why attending dark-sky events has become so popular in recent years. Where else can you disregard your normal routine, stay up all night, poke your eyes into the far reaches of the Universe, and then sleep till noon, day after day? This is just a small part the magic star parties hold.

New star parties are popping up all over the country, while the long established events have grown to gigantic proportions. This is good! Having a few days or a week to enjoy our favorite hobby, while sharing the daytime hours with kindred souls is an experience that is hard to match.

At any star party you will meet all types of people. Many have been mainly armchair observers who are taking their first trip into dark skies. In order to fit in.... and to keep from seeming to be completely unenlightened to the more experienced astronomers, there are a few simple things that you need to learn. Etiquette is not something that we are born knowing - it is something that has to be learned. Here are a few tips that will help you make many new friends at your next Star Party, and to keep everyone from pointing at you and saying, "My God! Who is that Geek?"

Come prepared!

No matter what temperature you hear it will be, prepare for weather that is at least 20 degrees colder. Make and use a check list to see that you don't leave home without something you need, such as your eyepiece case, or red flashlight. If you bring a telescope, set up a small tool box containing extra batteries, lights, etc. If you want to make friends, avoid having to always borrow things. Bring a cooler or thermos, and something for a late night snack. Even better, bring along some goodies to share with your friends around you. If you are not familiar with the observing site, arrive early enough so that you don't have to arrive after dark, not knowing where you are going, and disrupt everyone with your headlights.

Lights

No white lights after sundown if there are other observers in the area. Allow yourself to become ark-adapted and see all that you can see. If you are on dangerous terrain and need a bright red light, for heavens sake, keep it pointed straight down! Don't walk around waving it in everyone's face, because if you shine it in the eyes of the wrong person, they may tell you where to stick it. If you have to open your car door or trunk after sundown, be kind enough to remove the fuse beforehand. It only takes a second. If you want to become unpopular quickly, just be the one who is always ruining his companions dark adaption by opening his car doors or trunk every few minutes and splashing bright light all over everyone.

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If you have to leave the party early in an auto, park where your lights will not bother those who are still observing, and so that you will not have to use your headlights or backup lights when you leave. They are so bright and are painful to those who are fully dark adapted. You can move the shift lever to neutral before starting your engine, and the backup lights won't come on. If a bright light can't be avoided, just yell "LIGHTS IN THREE SECONDS" first, to give everyone time to turn the other way. You will be somewhat appreciated for your thoughtfulness!

If you have one of the new cars that have "daytime running lights" that come on as soon as you turn the key on, there IS a way that is easy to turn them off temporarily. Simply lift the emergency brake one click, and now you can turn the key without the lights coming on. After you drive a couple of hundred yards away from the observing group, remember to turn the emergency brake off, so you don't cause undo damage to the brake system.

Rules?

Read the star party information that is handed out to you when you register. There will be a simple list of rules. FOLLOW THEM!! If they say "No moving of cars after sunset", then don't move your car after sunset. If you are registered in a local motel instead of camping on the grounds, then you must make arrangements before hand to be able leave when you wish. At most star parties this means parking outside the gates, or far enough away so you will be able to leave when you wish, without shining bright lights all over those who are still observing and ruining their night vision. Almost all the problems that pop up come from people who never read the star party literature, or those who believe that the rules only pertain to others. If you would rather not follow the rules... then go observing on your own, where your method of operation will not bother anyone else.

Star Parties are the perfect place to learn more about observing, more about telescopes, and more about all the other accessories that go with the hobby. If you are considering purchasing a particular model, or building your own telescope, there is no better place to learn all the latest news, or to see the latest designs, and to get first hand advice from other amateurs who have experience with the item you are thinking about. Walking around the observing field during the day will show you almost everything imaginable. With the owners permission, you may be able to try that new item you have been considering, or to see if that new telescope design is as good as it looks on paper.

However, remember to be considerate! Don't move in on someone without an invitation. Everyone loves to show off their equipment once in awhile, but they also have their own little group of friends that they are observing with. Unless you are lucky enough to be asked to join them for the entire evening, don't impose. Use common sense and keep your visit to a reasonable length of time.

Bring your telescope!

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Some amateurs have the idea that they can look through their own telescope any time they wish at home, so when they go to a star party they don't even take their telescope with them, thinking, "I'll spend my time looking through everyone else's telescope." What if everyone on the observing field thought the same thing. Not fair! Unless you are flying to the star party, there is no excuse for not bringing your own telescope - if you have one. Even if you only have a small telescope, it is only fair to every one else to bring it with you, and not just go to look through the largest telescopes. You may have a model that someone else would like to see. Don't expect everyone else to do all the work, so you can be entertained. You should do your share of entertaining too!

Dobsonians

Learn how to operate a Dobsonian before you have to embarrass yourself by yelling down from the top of a ladder, "It's moving out of the field!" It's not polite to loose the object being viewed with 25 people standing in line behind you. These large telescopes are so easy to use that you can learn how with just a couple of minutes preparation ahead of time, so don't waste everyone's time by waiting until you are at the eyepiece and then ask what to do. Take the time to learn earlier in the day, as a courtesy to everyone else.

Big Scopes

The largest telescopes on the field are not necessarily public property. It is probable that their owners have their own observing programs to carry out. If you would like to look through one, and everyone does, ask first. If possible, ask ahead of time if the scope will be open for public observing during the star party. Find out when, and go during the proper time.

Piggy

Don't become an eyepiece hog on someone else's telescope. Of course you should never simply take a two second look at an interesting object, and when you are at your own telescope you should learn to study each object - to train your eye to see all that it can see. But when you are at someone else's telescope, don't get carried away and spend hours hogging their observing time. Keep your visit short, and then move on to the next scope on the field.

Smokers

Smokers need to be especially considerate of non-smokers. Since you are outside on the observing field, the smoke itself is not usually a problem. The problem is lighting up. The normally insignificant glow of a lighter or match is a killer to the dark-adapted eyes of your friends. Be careful to turn away, and cup your hands around the flash, so the flare of your match won't ruin anyone's eyes but your own. Also keep in mind that eventually someone will have to pick up every cigarette and cigar butt you throw on the ground, so please use an ashtray, or collect your butts before you leave.

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Music

Music is a great relaxation to many. To some, it just isn't possible to observe without the proper mood setting musical accompaniment. Many love to scope out the heavens while listening to heavy metal rock at 110 decibels. Others may enjoy an eight hour Elvis session. Great! Enjoy yourself! Turn it up! Play it as loud as you like it.... just wear earphones. The battle of the bands does not belong on the observing field. Many appreciate the new "space music" at a low volume, to set the mood. But if anyone complains...back to the earphones.

Be Helpful

Share your knowledge. A star party is a place for learning, and a place for teaching. If you see a novice struggling to locate an object in his telescope, ask if you can be of assistance. Chances are he will appreciate it. Every once in a while take a break and walk around the observing field. You will see both some amazing and some comical sights. Enjoy yourself, and help others to enjoy themselves!

Quiet Mornings

Loud talking or other noise before noon is out of place, and rude to those observers who don't retire till dawn. On the other hand, loud talking on the observing field at 4 AM is rude to early risers who may be leaving on a day trip at dawn. Perhaps families with small children, and other early risers, could place their camp in an area where they won't be disturbed by astronomers talking all night, or disturb astronomers who are trying to sleep late the next morning.

Trash

Trash belongs in the trash can, not around your site. You would be amazed at how many people think nothing of leaving it lay till "tomorrow", but by morning it has blown over to someone else's space. If you finish a drink while visiting someone else's area, don't leave your trash for them to clean up after you.

Be Nice

As the end of a week-long star party nears, you will notice that most of the die-hard observers are becoming a little brain-dead. Observing till dawn night after night, followed by too few hours of sleep, has the tendency of sharpening ones tongue a little. Be careful what you say while in this condition. Nothing worse than looking into someone's 48" Mega Monster telescope, and declaring the view to be much worse than it was in your Super Duper 6" last night. That's not how to win friends.

Be considerate. Just because you paid a few dollars registration fee does not entitle you to boss everyone around. The people who run the star parties are just volunteers, not paid servants! Volunteer your services if they need help. Running a star party is a lot of work. When you see a crew setting up chairs to convert the mess hall into the lecture hall, jump in and lend a hand ...it will be appreciated. Never touch or move someone's telescope without first asking permission. A telescope that looks unattended may be in the middle of a difficult star hop to some

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illusiv target, and you may have one angry person on your hands if you act before thinking.

Star Parties are for fun. Go in a good mood, and stay in one. Things will go wrong, especially with the complicated equipment amateurs use. You will forget something, or you may not be able to set up exactly how you would like to, or park where you would like. Make the best of it; don't get in a sour mood and spoil it for everyone. As always, the age-old advice "Do Unto Others...." is the best advice, and hard to beat.

Convention or Star Party?

There are two major types of conventions that fall under the heading of star parties. The first is an astronomy convention, but observing is not the highest priority, as other activities come first. If you are one of the organizers, be honest in telling the people what to expect. Don't advertise a dark sky, when in reality your site is close to town and has a light dome reaching to the zenith. Honesty is always the best policy.

At Dark Sky star parties observing is the major attraction, with other activities built around the observing. Before you decide to attend a star party, check it out to make sure that the party you select will fit your needs. An astrophotographer will not be very happy trying to take astrophotos at a convention where people are walking around with white lights, and an armchair astronomer may not be at his best at dark sky star parties where only dim red lights are allowed.