



# MICHIANA

## ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY



# The Sirius Observer

**April 2009**

**South Bend, Mishawaka, Elkhart, Niles**

### April's Meeting:

## Astrophotography

A Special Presentation by  
**Craig Lent**



**April 20, 2009**  
**7:00 P.M.**  
**Mishawaka Public Library**  
**Lions Room**

### Event Calendar

#### April 2009

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2 ☾	3	4
5	6	7	8	9 ☉	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17 ☽	18
19	20	21	22	23	24 ●	25
26	27	28	29	30		

- Apr 2: First Quarter Moon
- Apr 9: Full Moon
- Apr 17: Last Quarter Moon
- Apr 20: **MAS Meeting, 7:00 PM**
- Apr 24: New Moon
- Apr 25: New Moon observing, Potawatomi

#### May 2009

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					1 ☾	2
3	4	5	6	7	8 ☉	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17 ☽	18	19	20	21	22	23
24 ●	25	26	27	28	29	30 ☾
31						

- May 1: First Quarter Moon
- May 8: Full Moon
- May 17: Last Quarter Moon
- May 18: **MAS Meeting, 7:00 PM**
- May 23: New Moon observing, Potawatomi
- May 24: New Moon
- May 30: First Quarter Moon, again!

### **Star Party Etiquette**

With Spring either here or just around the corner (depending on how you measure such things,) it's time for a reminder of proper etiquette at the many star parties we're all planning on attending this year. Some are obvious; others aren't. The one thing they have in common is that violating any of them will make you *very* unpopular.



The single most important consideration at a star party is light – how much and what kind. Bright light visible from anywhere near the observing field will be universally banned, regardless of source or reason. Most people manage to remember to leave their flashlight in the car but fewer consider all the light sources in a modern car. Head lights, obviously, yes but there are also backup lights, running lights, turn signals and brake lights to consider, not to mention interior lights including the light in the glove box. All of them are far too bright for an observing field.

Modern cars sometimes seem determined to be astronomy unfriendly. Take my car for example – you'd think a Saturn would behave itself in the dark. Hah! Like many modern cars, it insists on having some sort of lighting on at all times – if the headlights are turned off, it has lower power but still bright running lights which switch on as soon as you put the car in gear. Other cars automatically turn their headlights

on when it gets dark. Defeating these safety features takes pre-planning and in some cases, preparation. My Saturn's running lights, for example, will remain off when the car is in gear if the parking brake is on (I have a standard transmission.) I've discovered, by experiment, that engaging the parking brake two clicks is enough to keep the running lights off, while not actually engaging the parking brake. The warning bell may drive someone crazy but at least the lights are off! Somewhere in your car's owner's manual may be advice on running your car with the lights off.

If you can't turn the lights off, the next best thing is to dim them to an acceptable color and brightness. Covering them with deep red translucent plastic is one possible solution (this is where the duct tape jokes go.) Parking your car so that you won't have to back up in order to leave eliminates problems with backup lights, and driving very slowly might help you avoid the need to hit the brakes. Even though most brake lights are already red in color, they're still far too bright: anyone in eyesight of these babies going off will lose their night adaptation for many minutes.



Interior lights are easier: there's almost always a way to turn them off documented in your owner's manual. Plan ahead so that you don't need to open the glove compartment, and you're all set.

Speaking of cars, space on some observing fields can be limited and many telescopes are only portable by a generous definition of the word. If you don't bring a telescope with you, consider parking off of the main observing field, so that what space there is is available to those with large bulky telescopes. Remember where these are; they're the ones you're going to want to look through when it gets dark.

Ordinary flashlights are usually far too bright to be useful, but some prior preparation can work wonders. Cover the light-emitting end of the tool with red cellophane or something similar, secured with rubber bands or tape. A better solution is to take the flashlight lens apart and paint the bulb with deep red fingernail polish. If that's still too bright, paint the inside of the lens as well. Note that lights appear far brighter after your eyes have adapted to darkness, so making your flashlight darker than you think necessary is likely to be about right.



Of course, a real astronomer's red flashlight with low-power LED's is the best solution.

Most folks at a star party enjoy showing off their telescopes to curious crowds, and most of them expect that others will want to look through them. Be polite and ask and you'll probably learn more about telescopes and whatever that particular observer is enthusiastic about. But don't touch anything without permission. Most telescopes aren't particularly delicate but there are several bits and pieces which can get out of alignment with a good bump and even the largest telescope vibrates and the view goes up

and down and all around if you grab on to the telescope and try to hold it. The correct manner of using a telescope at a star party is to let the owner manipulate it and just look through the eyepiece, without touching, if you can. Not only will you get the best view, you're most likely to be invited to look at other things, too.



Watch your step on the observing field! It's dark and hard to see wires, tripod legs, or stargazers laying on blankets. Some observers power their telescopes from their car battery, so be especially careful when walking between a telescope and a nearby car.

If you smoke, remember that you're a dying breed (literally, unfortunately.) Please try to smoke downwind of others. The prospect of cigarette smoke accumulating on incredibly expensive lenses or mirrors is a real worry. Please try not to contribute to it.

Pets are often not allowed on the observing field, for obvious reasons. Ask before you bring them to the star party. Even if allowed, bring something to clean up after them.



Kids are always welcome at star parties, but if you bring them you are responsible for them. A dark field littered with fragile people and

expensive telescopes, computers, cameras, etc. makes a very poor playground. Don't let your kids run on the observing field. (I know, it can be difficult. But it's important. If your child knocks over and damages an expensive piece of equipment, you're responsible.) Don't let young children have or carry drinks or snacks on the observing field. Don't let them anywhere near a regular flashlight.



Regardless of season, it's always colder at night than most people realize. Bring extra clothing, even jackets, and most importantly, bring warm hats for everyone. Some star parties have coffee, tea or other hot drinks available, others don't. When in doubt, bring your own thermos, and possibly a light snack. A few Oreos can do wonders at 3:00 AM, just before ET shows up.

By the nature of things, observing the night sky pretty much guarantees that you'll be outdoors. Bugs, especially mosquitoes, are almost guaranteed. Bring the bug repellent of your choice. However, try to avoid spray products: no one wants to view the heavens through bug spray coated optics. If you must use a spray, use it before you get onto the observing field or use it far downwind of any telescopes. Also, try to keep the bug repellent off of your fingers: it has a tendency to smear all over everything. And it always seems to get into your drink. Yuck!

Many star parties have activities during the daylight hours as well as observing after dark. Whether the daylight activities interest you or not, you should plan to arrive at the star party well before darkness falls. This gives you the chance to find a parking place, locate the restrooms and food vendors, and to perhaps make the acquaintance of the owner of that really impressive telescope down at the far end of the field while you can still see. If you must

leave during the hours of darkness, park so that the lights from your car won't shine onto the observing field after dark.



One of the great pleasures of a star party is the opportunity to meet new people and see astronomy in action. Feel free to wander around (carefully!), ask questions, and even ask to see through a particularly interesting telescope. Don't monopolize someone's time, though: remember, they're here because they want to observe.

After staying up all night looking at the stars, what do you suppose most folks want to do? That's right: sleep! Try to avoid making noise before noon at least.

**Reminder: Second Annual Michiana Star Party will be at Potawatomi Wildlife Park, on May 29-31. See you there!**