Photo: Terence Dickinson/SkyNews Magazine

Make Your Stargazing Events Shine

BY DAVID GAMEY

Jim Cornish's article on the Night Sky is a great introduction to stargazing. With the following tips, even people unfamiliar with the stars can build their knowledge and confidence to lead a stargazing event.

Keep it Comfortable

Lying in a clearing, gazing up at the stars can be a wonderful experience. Use ground sheets or camp mattresses to keep away the damp. Mug up (a snack and drink) afterwards is always welcome.

Can't see the Constellations for the Stars?

Switching from urban to dark sky observing can be almost overwhelming the first few times. Stars that you could easily find in the city can get lost in the vivid background of the Milky Way. If you're looking for something specific, try getting out for a practice look or allow extra time. If you have a telescope, make sure the finder and main scope are properly aligned or you may find yourself lost in space.

Planning your Event

Before you go out, consider building planispheres (star wheels) and practicing with them at a meeting. Free templates for cardboard ones can be found on-line (or on my blog). You could also prepare some astronomical flashlights. Attach several layers of red cellophane over the ends of flashlights, holding them on with elastic bands. Try and see how little light you need to read.

Sites such as **http://www.skyandtelescope.com/observing/ataglance** provide information about what planets are visible in the night sky. For satellites and observing forecasts, you need location specific information. Two sites I recommend for this are:

- **Clear Sky Charts** http://cleardarksky.com/csk/ provides the best observing forecasts for over 3,500 locations. These charts give much more information than cloud cover and precipitation.
- **Heavens Above** http://www.heavens-above.com/ provides information on satellites including the Space Station, Shuttle, Iridium flares, and others. You do need to configure your latitude, longitude and altitude to get accurate predictions.

At the Stargazing Event

Tailor your event to your age group. Organize parallel events to keep attention and events manageable (especially if equipment is involved).

If you are using equipment, such as a telescope that requires setup, get to your site before your group and leave enough time to set up and adapt your eyes to the dark. Remember to keep the lens and eyepieces covered until use to prevent dew buildup on them.

Have other leaders take your group on a pre-watch night hike. Keep flashlights off to get their eyes adapted for night vision (about 20 minutes).

Break into smaller groups and rotate through the activities. One group can look at constellations, the Milky Way, and perhaps meteors and satellites. Another can use their planispheres. A binocular group can look at nebula, open clusters, the Andromeda Galaxy, and perhaps a comet. Use the telescope to look at planets, binary stars, globular clusters, smaller nebula, and galaxies. Take care to have the youth move their eye to the eyepiece and not touch the scope. Telescopes will need to be adjusted every few minutes to compensate for the Earth's rotation unless they are capable of tracking.

Clear skies everyone!

– David Gamey is an enthusiastic Scouter with the 433rd Toronto Scouting Group, who has developed his own ScoutBlog with articles on compassless navigation, building planispheres, choosing binoculars and telescopes, integrated SkyForecast charts for some Scout camps, ringed planets, Earth's other moons, and much more. Check out the site using category labels such as http://mangsbatpage.433rd.com/search/label/Astronomy or http://mangsbatpage.433rd.com/search/label/SkyForecast.

Super Astronomy Books

- Night Watch: A Practical Guide to Viewing the Universe by Terence Dickinson
- Celestial Sites, Celestial Splendors by Herve Burillier
- Turn Left at Orion: A Hundred Night Sky Objects to See in a Small Telescope – and How to Find Them by Guy Consolmagno, et al
- The Backyard Astronomer's Guide by Dickinson & Dyer.

Earth Hour – March 28, 2009

Earth Hour will allow us to appreciate dark skies and how we can help the environment. See **http://www.earthhour.org/**. Plan on joining in now, and watch for ideas on how to do so in the March/April issue of *Scouting Life*.

2009 – The International Year of Astronomy

This is the year with all kinds of educational and awareness events happening on a global and local level. For more information and resources see **http://www.astronomy2009.org/**. Look for sites and events sporting their official logo. There are 11 cornerstone projects – something for everyone!