

SPACE.com's Star Party Survival Guide

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Special to SPACE.com

SPACE.com's "Star-Party Survival Guide" provides you with useful tips to help make the most of your stargazing party experience this summer.

Come prepared

Be aware that many star parties are held in remote locations where there are no bathroom facilities. Ask the party organizers what facilities are available and make plans accordingly.

Be sure to bring some water with you and perhaps some light snacks. Being active late at night makes most people hungry. Even if you do not get hungry you will certainly need something to drink, particularly on warm summer nights.

In most parts of the country you'll also want to carry bug repellent. Many insects are most active at night, and in some places mosquitoes can eat you alive in an hour. Bug repellent is available at sporting goods stores; the rub-on types seem to work better than the sprays.

What to wear

Do bring warm clothes -- warmer than you think you might need. Most people are not used to being outside late at night and you may find it is a lot colder than you expected.

Wear sturdy footwear, such as running shoes or hiking boots. In the dark it's hard to see what is underfoot and what you are stepping on, so your feet should be protected from sharp rocks, cactus or whatever inhabits the ground in at that site.

Children welcome

Star parties are family affairs and children are welcome. If you do bring children, be sure they stay with you at all times. If they're very small and they start crying, take them back to your car until they can be quieted down. Many children become cranky if they stay up too late, but are happy to sleep in the car if they have a blanket and their favorite toys.

When to arrive

It's important to arrive at the star party before dark. There are always a few stragglers who arrive after dark, but that is frowned upon because those already there don't like headlights shining at them after their vision has become dark-adapted. When you arrive after dark, you also run the risk of not finding the place at all: Many sites that are easy to find in daytime can be nearly impossible to find in the dark.

If you arrive before dark you'll also have a chance to see all the scopes being set up (often interesting to watch, particularly with the really huge scopes). You'll find that most astronomers are quite talkative and willing to discuss the telescopes and how they work, particularly if you offer to help them set up.

If you do have to arrive after dark, turn off your headlights far enough away from the viewing area so they won't disturb anyone. Drive in the rest of the way using your parking lights. When you first turn off your headlights the parking lights may seem

inadequate, but if you give yourself a minute to become more dark-adapted you'll find you can drive just fine with just the parking lights.

Bright lights, big no-no

A car's dome and other interior lights are amazingly bright to someone whose vision is dark-adapted and you will greatly annoy a lot of people if you pop open a door and light up the countryside. Be sure you know how to disable these lights in your car before you head out to the star party. On some cars there's a simple switch for this, on others you need to yank the bulbs out of the fixtures, or even pull a fuse. As a last resort you can tape a piece of cardboard over the dome and door lights. (On some automobiles this is the only solution.)

A note about exterior running lights: Some cars, General Motors models in particular, have "running lights" -- special lights that are similar to headlights, but always on. If you own such a vehicle it can cause some difficulty at a star party because you cannot turn them off. Try to use another vehicle if possible and, if not, try to park away from the group so that the lights do not disturb others.

You may find it very handy to bring a small red light. Light at the red wavelength does not affect night vision, so at a star party you'll find that it is the only one used. You are not obligated to bring your own red light, but it will be very handy for seeing your way around in the dark. You can find these at astronomy shops or at sporting goods stores. Many are just small flashlights equipped with red filters.

If you do purchase a red light, don't make it a very bright one because that will defeat the purpose. A dim light works well, and you'll be amazed how bright it is once your eyes become dark-adapted.

Observing at a star party

Once the observing is underway, feel free to go from scope to scope and talk with everyone. They'll be more than happy to let you look through their scopes, and will also be glad to talk about the telescope, what they're looking at and anything else that interests you. This kind of discussion and chit-chat is expected at star parties, particularly from visitors; don't feel that you are imposing on them. Most star party attendees will "make the rounds" at least once during the night to see what others are looking at and what kind of equipment they brought; feel free to join in.

Likewise, don't be afraid to ask questions about what's in the sky, where different constellations are or anything else. Astronomers, particularly amateur astronomers, are used to questions like that and they typically enjoy explaining such things to other people.

Where it is dark and free of ambient light there is an interesting effect: even if you know the location of some constellations, you may find that under a dark sky there are so many stars that you can't pick out the constellations. In the days before light pollution, this is how everyone saw the sky, filled with thousands of stars. For modern city dwellers, however, it may take a bit of practice to find the constellations again.

Leaving a star party

When you're ready to leave, don't just start the engine and drive off. Let others know that you're planning to leave and ask if anyone is in the middle of an astrophoto exposure. If anyone is, the etiquette is to wait until the exposure is finished before starting the engine

or turning on any lights. Even just stepping on the brake will light the very bright taillights on the car, so be careful not to step on the brake while getting into or out of the vehicle.

It's a good idea to ask the organizers of the star party when most people will be leaving so you can plan accordingly. Most club star parties usually break up a little after midnight, but that varies from club to club. It also varies with the moon. If the moon rises during the night, most people will start packing as soon as they see the horizon glow that precedes the moonrise.

When you do leave, use your parking lights instead of headlights, just as when arriving after dark.

Enjoying the experience

Most of all, enjoy the night sky and the company. While they are not loud and festive, star parties are very enjoyable social affairs that are also quite educational.

With warm summer nights ahead, this is a great time to plan to attend a star party. Contact a local astronomy club and go see all the things that are right above you every night, which most people have never seen. It's an experience you'll truly enjoy.