

## HEAVENLY NEWS

### “Going to a Star Party”

By Cindy Terpe, Lead Docent

Cameron Park Rotary Community Observatory

Everyone loves going to a party...birthday parties, retirement parties, house-warming parties, and graduation parties. Odds are you have probably attended at least one of these, but have you ever heard of a star party? Now, I'm not talking about the Hollywood version where you'd get to meet and greet Tom Cruise or have a cocktail with Haley Berry. I'm talking about the celestial kind where you get together with local amateur astronomers to view the moon, some planets, and amazing balls of gas we call stars.

Star parties are a fun, engaging and can be conducted with the naked eye, binoculars, or with telescopes, as long as your site has reasonably dark skies. Local star parties may be one night events offered monthly, while larger events can last up to a week or longer. While these larger events are offered annually, they attract hundreds or even thousands of participants. At larger star parties you can find lectures, swap meets, exhibitions of home-built telescopes, raffles, and other similar activities. Some even have commercial vendors selling a variety of astronomical equipment.

Star parties can be a great educational experience for students. They give students the opportunity to put their observational skills to work, and to directly experience astronomy. Many students have never looked through a telescope before, and they will enjoy learning to identify some of the constellations. Just getting students to look at and notice the sky can help them to expand their understanding and delight in astronomy.

The easiest way to find a star party near you would be to contact your local observatory or astronomy club. In your case it would be the Community Observatory ([www.communityobservatory.com](http://www.communityobservatory.com)) here in Placerville. There is also the Sierra Stargazers ([www.sierrastargazers.org](http://www.sierrastargazers.org)) or the Sacramento Valley Astronomical Society ([www.svas.org](http://www.svas.org)). Or, just type “star parties” into your internet search engine.

Once you've decided on a star party, then your next step is to get prepared. There are many things you can do that will make your evening more enjoyable. Dressing appropriately (in layers according to the season) is the most important. No one likes getting cold. The next important thing is to understand the adaption of your eyes to the darkness. It takes your eyes about 30 minutes to become completely adapted to the dark, but just a second or two to lose your night vision because someone shined a flashlight in your eyes. Also learn to use your “averted vision” when viewing objects. This means looking slightly to the right or left, or above or below an object instead of directly at it. Your eyes are primarily designed to see in the daylight so the focus of most light is in the center of the eye. The areas away from the center of your eye are more adapted to seeing dim objects.

As with any other hobbyist gathering, there is much camaraderie and discussion of various aspects of astronomy at any star party. You will certainly walk away wanting more knowledge and equipment!

You can learn more about star parties by visiting the Community Observatory located behind the El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College (off of Green Valley Road in Placerville). The Observatory is free to the public and is open on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings, weather permitting, about 30 minutes after sunset. For more information about the Observatory, driving directions and closure notices please go to [www.communityobservatory.com](http://www.communityobservatory.com)