

HEAVENLY NEWS

“You’re Invited to a Star Party”

By Nicole Gauthier

Ever heard of a “Star Party”? I don’t mean the Academy Awards or the Emmy’s...the kind of Star Party I mean is a gathering of amateur astronomers to observe the wonders of the night sky. The idea of a Star Party is not new and the practice of hosting Star Parties may go back as far as the early 19th Century when George III of the United Kingdom, who was passionately interested in astronomy and mathematics, allegedly hosted his own Star Parties. On nights when poor weather blocked the view of the real stars and planets, attendants are said to have hung paper lanterns marked with drawings in the trees around the royal palace to provide something else for the King and his guests to spot through their telescopes.

Local Star Parties may be one night affairs, but larger events can last up to a week or longer and attract hundreds or even thousands of participants. Many regional star parties are now held annually and are an important part of the hobby of amateur astronomy. Typically a dark sky site away from light pollution is chosen as a location. Participants bring telescopes and binoculars of all types and sizes and spend the nights observing astronomical objects such as planets, comets, stars, and deep sky objects together. Astrophotography and CCD imaging are also very popular. At larger star parties, lectures, swap meets, exhibitions of home-built telescopes, contests, tours, raffles, and other similar activities are common. Commercial vendors selling a variety of astronomical equipment may also be present. As with any other hobbyist gathering, there is much camaraderie and discussion of various aspects of the hobby at any star party. It is a great way to expand your knowledge of amateur astronomy and to check out everyone else’s cool stuff.

If this sounds like fun, there is a newly formed group of amateur astronomers in the area, the Sierra StarGazers (SSG), who are hosting Friday evening Star Parties each month in a dark sky location in western El Dorado County. As a matter of fact, there is an SSG Star Party this coming weekend, **Friday, May 22nd** and the public is welcome. SSG Star Parties generally fall into the category of a **“one night affair”** where experienced amateur astronomers and new hobbyists are encouraged to mingle and observe the wonders of the night sky together.

Although the term “star party” suggests a boisterous group affair, in reality, binocular and telescope observation is a quiet activity that takes intense concentration. Fellow observers are usually encouraged to conduct quiet conversations about what is being observed and the equipment used in the many telescopes at a Star Party. For everyone’s safety and well-being; no drugs, no tobacco, and no alcohol are allowed at SSG Star Parties. However, everyone is encouraged to bring food and beverages...and hot drinks are a must on cold winter evenings! Because of the darkness, quiet atmosphere and extended period of time for observing, **young children (under 10 years old) and pets are not allowed** at SSG Star Parties.

The SSG Star Party on Friday, May 22nd starts before sunset (7:00 PM) with coordinators available to assist observers with telescope setup procedures, Newtonian mirror collimation, and

polar alignment questions. Over the years the SSG Coordinators have made (and survived) just about every setup and observing error possible, so don't be afraid to ask questions. So dust off that old telescope and bring it and the family to the SSG Star Party this weekend.

You may sign up online (no membership fees and no boring meetings) and each month, SSG members will be e-mailed an observing program for the upcoming Star Party for a group exploration of the night sky. A \$1 per person donation to offset the cost of maintaining the website is appreciated when you attend a Star Party. For a copy of this month's observing program, driving directions, and more information about the SSG amateur astronomy group, please visit www.sierrastargazers.org.