

DFAC Astronomy Night: Briefing for Telescope Operators

When we do an Astronomy Night observing session (sometimes called a "Star Party") for the public, participating DFAC members should plan on arriving with their scopes shortly before sunset so there's still enough light to facilitate setup and alignment.

Then, based on the scopes available, and the celestial objects available that night, we designate scopes for specific objects. For example, the largest aperture scope is usually dedicated to nebulae or galaxies, the highest resolution scope for planetary, and everything in between accordingly. Scope operators generally stay on those objects most of the night. We try to plan on having one telescope for every 10 people viewing just to keep the lines short.

Since we choose a night with a crescent-quarter Moon (when we can), that's usually the first target object for all the scopes, just to break people in. So at the start, all scopes are on the Moon, but at different mags, filter's, FOV's, etc. This gives the people a sense of the differences between scopes and accessories. It's also a good time to explain general things like "power," "field of view," and "how to look through an eyepiece."

It's also a good time to explain things about your telescope, like what kind it is, what the various parts do, and what makes it different from other types of scopes.

As the night progresses, people line up for views and get their turn at each scope. The scope operator should know a little about the object they're on ... basic stuff like "what is it?" "how far?" etc. You don't need to know it all. If you get a question you can't answer, don't bluff. Tell them you're a beginner too and are still learning, and will try to find an answer for them.

We usually observe from just after sunset + 2 hours or so, depending on weather. When we schedule for one of these, it gets posted on the Quid Novi page of our website. This is also where we update weather conditions and post cancellation and rescheduling info if needed.

If we get clouded out while onsite (and that does occasionally happen) there are several options for Plan B. Depending on the view, terrestrial objects can also be interesting and still allow the guests to learn something about telescopes, light pollution, and seeing conditions. Still another possibility is an astronomy multimedia presentation (venue permitting).

Above all, your enthusiasm and patience is critical to a successful event. You will get asked some dumb questions, and you will get asked some tough questions. Handle them all with tact and honesty. Try to share your sense of wonderment about this hobby. If the guests can go home with an expanded view of astronomy, then we have done our job.