

ASTRONOMY CAMP FOR KIDS

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Abstract: *AstroCamp* immerses kids in stargazing and telescope observing at YMCA Camp Eberhart in Three Rivers, Michigan. By day the kids make star finders, practice using telescopes, marvel under a portable planetarium, build water rockets, track sunspots, and seek astronomical treasures on a scavenger hunt. By night they direct a dozen 8-inch telescopes skyward, find deep sky objects, identify stars and constellations, and earn awards. Guest astronomy educators are welcome to join the fun.

AstroCamp is a week-long camping experience for children ages 10-12 that emphasizes stargazing, telescope handling, and fun. Held at YMCA Camp Eberhart in Three Rivers, Michigan, the program allows the kids to enjoy typical camp activities during the morning, followed by astronomy sessions in the afternoon. At night, when the regular campers retire to their cabins, the *AstroCampers* begin a night under the stars.

A volunteer staff of about 5 amateur astronomers manages the instruction of 25 kids. Though the kids clearly learn astronomy skills, the intent is still for it to be a camp and not school. On the first day, campers make star finders, find their way under the starfield of a portable planetarium, and get their hands on 8-inch Dobsonian reflectors. By nightfall they eagerly wander the dark sky with a telescope. After several days, the kids have logged dozens of found targets, both easy and challenging, particularly when visiting amateur astronomers bring their personal, sophisticated gear.

The camp has an impressive array of astronomy resources that have been amassed by director Lou Sandock of South Bend, Indiana. Though *AstroCamp* has a 12-inch Dynascope telescope in a hilltop observatory, we rely on a dozen portable 8-inch scopes for the kids to handle. *Astrocamp's* latest acquisition is a hydrogen-alpha telescope from Coronado, which allows observers to see solar prominences in real time. A wide sample of printed books, magazines, and charts are readily available references, and seven computers with *Starry Night* software always attract interested kids. Serendipitous discovery abounds when the kids have free time.

Fun is a priority. On a hot summer day, we meet under the porch and build water-propelled rockets out of 2-liter bottles, foam board, and duct tape. Launch time is wet time. For another diversion we talk briefly about astronomy and Hollywood, then follow it up with a watery “*Star Wars*” using squirt guns and soakers. Late in the week, a scavenger hunt allows kids to work as teams, combining what they have discovered to gain hidden treasure. The campers may also demonstrate their new knowledge to earn awards in Constellations, the Moon, Telescopes, and more.

AstroCamp welcomes participation by amateur astronomers who want to have fun with kids who specifically enroll for a week under the firmament. Room and board is provided to instructors, and you can barter your time for a week's concurrent enrollment in the regular camp (or *AstroCamp*) for your child. Registration for campers is just over \$400.00 per week. The site enjoys fairly dark skies on the shore of Corey Lake, and often the instructors stay up well into the night to continue observing after the campers have gone to bed.

For more information on how you can get in on the fun, even if for only a short stay, contact me at 574-271-3150.