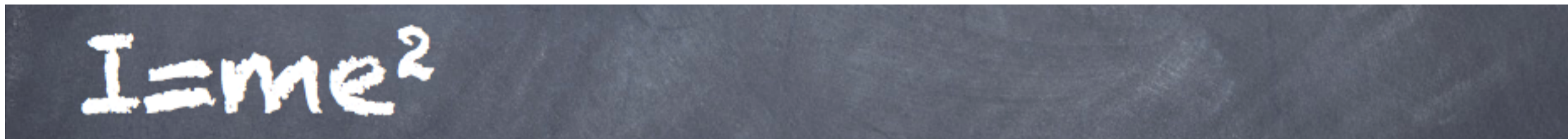


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- [Blog » »](#)
- [Projects » »](#)
- [Chuck Stuff » »](#)
- [Contact](#)



[Home](#) > [Blog](#) > Michiana Star Party 5

Blog

Michiana Star Party 5

Posted by admin on April 17, 2013



I encourage you to get out under the stars--literally, a vast canopy of stars--May 10-12 at the 2013 Michiana Star Party. Dozens of amateur astronomers set up their telescopes, observe through the night, and revel in the majesty of a dark night sky. Whether you bring a scope or not, come out to see a unique perspective on nature in which human impact on the nightscape is briefly sidestepped. The event is coordinated by the [Michiana Astronomical Society](#).

When I ask adults to share some mind-blowing experience they've had with a truly dark sky, many of them perk up to recall a memorable vacation to some distant and remote site. Few cite a regional destination. Where was your best night sky?

And if you ask kids to share their best stargazing experience, most of them acknowledge seeing stars, but I never hear youth today profess any epiphany under the firmament--much less, an OMG moment worthy of a Facebook entry. It's as if the stars aren't even there.

For two nights, astronomy enthusiasts casually set up their telescopes ranging from 2-inch refractors to 20-plus-inch reflectors in a field at [Dr. T.K. Lawless County Park](#) in Vandalia, MI. Nothing pretentious or intimidating, though some of the views can be overwhelming. It's just a group of like-minded folks who find cause and time alike to celebrate celestial marvels that are accessible in the night.

A highlight by day is the speaker series, beginning with Dr. Phil Sakimoto's talk on Saturday at 1:00 p.m. EDT, at which he addresses the forces that shape our national space policy and what we can do to regain its focus. Ensuing talks at 2:00 and 3:00 p.m. by Arielle Phillips and Jim Hopkins feature theoretical astronomy and Comet ISON, respectively.

Here's how a typical Michiana Star Party works...

Friday Arrival

On Friday evening, the scope owners start to arrive at the park entrance, eager to stretch after driving in from Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan. They find a preferred camping spot where their telescope can be conveniently set up adjacent to their tent or camper or motor home. Out come scopes, chart tables, flashlights, and chairs. Some bring a high step ladder just to reach the elevated eyepiece of their biggers scopes when aimed skyward. For some, it's the first outing in springtime under dark skies, while other more intrepid observers have simply been doing it year-round.



The atmosphere is casual as star party participants wander the field meeting old acquaintances or making new ones. Okay, there is a slight geek factor as they compare new eyepieces they've acquired or scopes they've modified. Anticipation runs high, for a mostly clear night is a fine reward for someone who has been preparing a list of targets to view that first night.

Newbies are always eagerly welcomed into the fold. If you've got a telescope, register (for a fee) and set up alongside the big scopes. Ask for insight on how to get the most of your humble gear, and expect to spend hours drifting from scope to scope as you compare the starfields or learn new tips from each observer. Sure, that wobbly scope given to you by a well-intentioned family member may seem out of place among the more serious attendees. But don't let your first foray into real stargazing be overwhelmed by someone who's been doing it as a hobby for years. Learn from the veterans. Embrace the opportunity to get more discovery in your own ensuing outings. I might drive an old mini-van, but I still enjoy an occasional fine auto show.

If the weather is cloudy on Friday evening, May 10, visitors give informal talks under the shelter. A microphone and video projector are available if you want to bring materials or a prepared digital slide show. Look for a sign-up sheet to get in the queue. You'll be surprised at how informed and passionate about astronomy some of the amateurs are. Afterward, a movie will be shown outdoors for younger kids.

Scopes Up

Finally, night settles in. Tubes of all sizes are aimed in different directions. Perhaps a cluster of people have gathered to socialize around one random scope. Other observers may be stationed at their own equipment, diligently hopping from target to target in an observer's marathon, but step right up and ask if you can take a peek. From my experience, anyone who's got significant aperture to gather the light of distant celestial highlights is always willing to share the goodness. We thank the corps of skilled amateurs who choose to attend the Michiana Star Party.



Whether you view the familiar rings of Saturn--stunning every time!--or some crazy hazy blob that is an uber-distant galaxy, you'll soon delight in the immensity and diversity of the universe. From the safe, quiet comfort of a dark field in Michiana, you are witnessing megaworlds and tumultuous denizens of galactic proportions, separated by unfathomable distances. Yet it is all brought to light by an offshoot of astronomy's great tool, the telescope. All in one pair of nights, May 10-12.

After a long night of observing, most people sleep in. There are options. [Dr. T.K. Lawless Park](#) has much outdoor appeal, and it is connected to miles of trails for hiking, biking (helmets required), and running. Check out springtime flowers, or be the first to greet deer ambling in the woods. Or maybe just grab a cup of hot coffee from the shelter and recount with other morning stragglers what you saw the night before.

Saturday Feature

Saturday brings its own rewards. Invited speakers will present their insight at 1:00, 2:00, and 3:00 p.m. Enjoy top notch speakers in a casual park setting.

A Saturday highlight will certainly be Dr. Philip Sakimoto's talk, *The Dream is Alive...And Changing*, at 1:00 p.m. Dr. Sakimoto is currently the Director of Academic Excellence for Notre Dame's College of First Year of Studies. Before coming to Notre Dame, he was the Program Manager and Acting Director of NASA's Space Science Education and Public Outreach Program, and a member of NASA's strategic planning team. The abstract hints at the compelling nature of his talk:

THE DREAM IS ALIVE . . . AND CHANGING

What is humankind's destiny? Is it to travel to the stars and build colonies in space, or is it something closer to home on Planet Earth? In this talk, Dr. Sakimoto will offer an insider's perspective on human space travel from Apollo to the present day. How do political forces shape space policy? What are the realities of time, costs, and safety? Why do we now seem so lost in space, and what can we do about it?



Jim Hopkins of Naperville, IL, continues at 2:00 p.m. with his talk *ISON, Comet of the Century?*

ISON, COMET OF THE CENTURY?

For thousands of years, mankind has been in awe of comets. Tragedies have followed some famous comets, and therefore mankind believed that comets were exhalations of the devil actually causing defeats in battle, plagues, earthquakes, etc. This talk will explain where comets originate, how they enter the solar system, and how they grow tails. Their chemistry, orbits, and impacts within the solar system will be discussed. ISON, perhaps the largest comet in decades, will be used as the case study, and its general characteristics and sun grazing orbit will be highlighted.

This sungrazing comet, which makes its closest approach to the sun (called perihelion) on Thanksgiving Day, may be visible through some of the bigger scopes at the Star Party. Jim will share the story of this solar system interloper, which is highly anticipated yet which may not survive the seering encounter with the sun. NASA is pooling its resources to follow closely the comet's saga, with observatories and spacecraft forming the [NASA Comet ISON Observing Campaign](#). Of course, the unpredictable Comet ISON is the impetus for the [2013 Comet Festival](#) in South Bend, Indiana, from November 28 to December 8.

Don't miss opportunities to view the sun safely through solar filtered telescopes on Saturday. The sun is in a period of high activity, so you've got a good chance of see sunspots and prominences, depending on the equipment used.

Saturday night brings a second opportunity to take in the splendors of a dark sky, so rest up. Sunset is at 8:52 p.m. EDT, with all eyes soon turning skyward to find the first telescopic targets. Nautical twilight is shortly after 10:00 p.m., and astronomical twilight is at 10:46 p.m.

Visit the MAS website at <http://www.michiana-astro.org> to register for the Michiana Star Party in advance and save money. Frankly, the savings are welcomed but not a lot of money because the entire cost of the star party is exceedingly low to begin with. Still, it's always nice to have a few more Abe Lincolns in your wallet or purse. And your pre-registration is very much appreciated by the organizers of the event. A portion of the fees go to Cass County Parks for their generous allowance for our overnight activity. You can always pay full rate at the gate on either Friday or Saturday evening.

As noted in the pre-registratin flyer ([PDF](#), [MSWord](#)), admission at gate for adults is \$30, under 18 is \$10, and camping fee is included. For guests with no intention of setting up equipment and who will be leaving by midnight, a small fee of \$5 per night is requested. That's a lot of heaven(s) for five bucks.



[Note: Food plan has changed. No food trailer as of April 22.]

If you're new to attending a star party, here are some guidelines. Basically, we ask that you not be offensive. For astronomers, that includes driving into or out of an observing area with your headlights on full beam. You want to avoid that gaffe.

- * Arrive after 3:00 p.m. Friday, set up before dusk
- * Star party ends at 11:00 a.m. Sunday
- * Parking in designated parking area
- * No car movement on the field after dark
- * Bring battery power for motorized mounts
- * Red flashlights only!
- * Minors must be accompanied by an adult
- * Dogs on leashes are allowed
- * Vendors and swap tables welcome!
- * Acoustical music instruments welcome!
- * Inappropriate behavior will result in eviction
- * Dress warmly
- * Smoking permitted beyond telescope areas, downwind
- * You are responsible for the security of your own belongings.

I hope to see you under the stars, whether you are spending the weekend with us or just a few hours. Hopefully you'll have that memorable dark-sky experience in the Midwest, if that's closer to your home. Bring a child or friend to share the splendor.

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Posted by Subhendra Misra on Jan 7th, 2014

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Dr. Sakimoto, I provided Database support at GSFC in 1993/94. Can you please call me at 301 332-6227.

Thanks again!

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 - ▶ February
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