Guidelines for Requesting a Public Observing

The Flint River Astronomy Club offers free public observings for any requesting group or agency at a site of that group's choosing. We enjoy showing the beauty and majesty of the universe as seen through telescopes and binoculars to everyone, especially young people.

Normally, we have between 3-10 telescopes set up and operated by FRAC members at our public observings, with visitors in line at each telescope and rotating from one line to another. In addition to the Moon and whatever planets are up, we'll show as broad a variety of celestial objects (e.g., double stars, galaxies, nebulas and star clusters) as time, sky conditions and light pollution permit. A background in astronomy facts is unnecessary in order for visitors to enjoy or understand our presentation, since our members will provide commentary and answer questions regarding what the viewers are seeing. All that your guests need to bring with them is curiosity regarding what the night sky holds.

Due to the travel involved and the great amount of money our members have invested in their telescopes and equipment, we offer the following guidelines for making the experience enjoyable for everyone:

Scheduling (Regarding the following, please remember that these are guidelines indicating our preferences, not rules carved in stone. We will work with you in finding mutually satisfactory observing dates.)

1a. In scheduling an observing, we recommend selecting two dates, a primary date and an alternate date (in case the primary date doesn't work out, weather-wise). If both dates prove unproductive, simply contact us again to reschedule the observing. The farther in advance you schedule an observing, the more likely you are to get the dates you want – and the more time our members will have to fit those observing dates into their own schedules.

1b. Unsuitable Scheduling Dates. The summer vacation months can be problematic for us in terms of assuring that we have enough members and telescopes present on any given summer evening to accommodate large groups. (Small groups pose no such problems.) However, the only dates we absolutely rule out are not seasonal but those that fall just before, on or just after July

4th, Thanksgiving or Christmas. Most of our public observings are held on weeknights between the hours of sundown-11:00 p.m. We can accommodate requests for daytime solar observings or speaking engagements. The only weekend(s) that we tend to rule out for public observings are our monthly club observing dates. Even then, though, we will make exceptions for groups willing to travel to our observing site. (Our club observings are held on the weekend[s] nearest to the new moon.) The full moon and the 3-4 days on either side of it function as a natural and powerful source of light pollution that bleaches out most of the night sky except the planets, but we don't mind if you don't. Of course, we have no control over which planets are up at any given time. At any rate, it is always helpful for us to know in advance approximately how many guests will be attending the observing, so we can plan accordingly.

2. Previously scheduled observings cannot be cancelled on the day of the event except by us. Some of our members go straight from work to the observing site, and there is simply no way of our ensuring that, in the event of bad weather, they will be notified at work that a scheduled observing has been cancelled. It is, however, acceptable to cancel a scheduled observing with more than one day's notice, since that gives us time to notify our members at home.

3. Alternative to Cancellation. We tell our members, "Look at the sky before you leave. If it looks bad where you are, it probably looks bad at the observing site, too. Don't go." So if it's cloudy when we're ready to leave, we won't go. The same policy should be in force at your end, too. Just tell the expected guests, children and adults alike, "If it's cloudy when you're getting ready to go, stay home."

4. We need the following information from you prior to the observing: (a) your name, e-mail address and/or telephone number, and that of your immediate superior (e.g., principal, supervisor); (b) the street address of the school or agency; and (c) directions to the observing site. (Use Griffin as a starting point, and give street names and approximate distances whenever possible. A map, whether hand-drawn or otherwise, is always helpful.)

The Observing Site

The observing site should be on level, stable ground that is free of obstructions, traffic and bright lights, if possible, and it should be accessible by automobiles since our telescopes are too

large and heavy to be carried very far. We prefer to set up in a grassy area rather than on pavement or dirt, since pavement retains daytime heat and creates shimmering telescopic images, and dirt raises dust that coats our mirrors and eyepieces. And since what our telescopes essentially show is the faint light of stars and other distant celestial objects that lie untold trillions of miles away from Earth, the presence of nearby bright lights such as streetlights or security lights reduces the visibility of all but the brightest celestial objects. Bright lights – even white-beam flashlights – also reduce adaptive night vision, making it more difficult to see objects telescopically. (We use red-beam flashlights that do not hinder night vision, and we urge you to tell prospective attendees not to bring flashlights that emit white beams.) If your site suffers heavy light pollution that cannot be avoided – well, we've conducted many such observings in the past and we'll continue to do so in the future. Like you, we will do the best we can under the prevailing conditions. (Incidentally, the best way to select a suitable site is to visit the area one evening prior to the observing date and see for yourself what the conditions are like and where the darkest usable areas are.)

Children and Pets

Children must be supervised at all times. (We suggest a ratio of 20 children or less per adult supervisor.) No horseplay or running around is permitted where the telescopes are set up, and the children should not touch the telescopes or equipment unless they are told to do so. Touching the tube even slightly will move objects out of the field of view – but more important, our telescopes are very expensive and can be easily damaged. Many of our members have invested thousands of dollars in buying the best telescopes and eyepieces on the market. We recommend, wherever possible, discussing with children beforehand the importance of the occasion and the necessity of their behaving properly. We encourage them – and the adults present, as well – to interact with us and ask questions, because that is, after all, how learning occurs.

Binoculars and Telescopes

While binoculars are always acceptable, we neither encourage nor discourage attendees from bringing their own telescopes to our observings. Problems arise whenever those telescopes need to be worked on and such tasks take our members away from their primary task of showing the sky to everyone else. We prefer to deal with such problems on our own turf and in our own

time, i.e., by inviting them to attend (and bring their telescopes to) a club observing session where, during the late afternoon hours, at least, we can work on their telescopes while there's daylight left.

Please, no pets (even on leashes) in the observing area.

Rights, Responsibilities and Liability

FRAC and its individual members should not and cannot be held liable for personal injury or property damage resulting from anything but flagrant abuse of basic safety precautions by FRAC members. Like a band performing at a school function, we are invited guests who operate under the direct supervision of the event organizer(s), and it is the responsibility of whomever is in charge to provide a safe, harmonious environment for everyone, including us, our telescopes and our equipment.

If you want to schedule an observing or daytime class presentation for your group, class, library, etc., please contact:

Evening observing: Dwight Harness, Observing Chairman,
rdharness@yahoo.com or (770) 227-9321

Daytime presentation or solar observing: Dr. Bill Warren, president,
warren7804@bellsouth.net or (770) 229-6108