

NOVAC

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Observing Sites: Past, Present, and Future

By Michael Mills

One of the greatest resources the Northern Virginia Astronomy Club (NOVAC) provides to its members is access to reasonably dark observing sites. The variety and distribution of sites has enable members from all over northern Virginia to find dark skies. The club's presence has benefited the parks as well, through numerous outreach programs and public star parties. Unfortunately, recent administrative changes and bureaucratic hassles have forced NOVAC out of some parks.

Last year, NOVAC had serious concerns about our ability to execute a requirement in the MOA with Crockett Park that at least one NOVAC member serve as "Observing Coordinator" for each observing session. Furthermore, the park inadvertently advertised monthly "Astronomy Programs", which the club was not prepared to provide. This led NOVAC to abandon Crockett as a regular observing site.

More recently, the Loudoun County Parks Authority has closed Mickie Gordon Park at night, locking the gate and requiring that a county employee supervise after-dark activities (despite the fact that the park is unsupervised for all daytime activities). Of course, this makes it impossible for NOVAC to use Mickie Gordon Park as an observing site, as the club cannot afford to pay a county employee for each observing session. Former president Tilly Smith, representing the club in negotiations with Loudoun Parks, has been working hard to get a workable agreement. So far, these efforts have failed.

Meanwhile, the club has been actively seeking out access to new observing sites: Bob Parks secured access to Mason Neck State Park; Ed Witkowski has been trying to reach an agreement with the owners of Legacy Farms Buffalo Ranch to give the club access to their property; Sean O'Brien got permission for club members to observe from the Hanson Farm, just a few miles south of Sky Meadows State Park; and Renee Pleasant found that the owners of Glengary Christmas Tree Farm wouldn't mind if we observed from their property. Finally, members Bob Garrett and Dave Durica are looking for property that the club can lease

2002 Observing Site Schedule

Savage Farm has been reserved for the following nights in 2002:

Savage Farm Observing Dates	
March	8,9,10;15,16,17
April	5,6,7; 12,13,14
May	3,4,5; 10,11,12; 17,18,19
June	7,8,9; 14,15,16
July	5,6,7; 12,13,14
August	2,3,4; 9,10,11; 30,31
September	1; 6,7,8; 13,14,15
October	4,5,6; 11,12,13
November	1,2,3; 8,9,10; 29,30
December	1; 6,7,8; 27,28,29

Crockett park has been reserved for the following two weeks out of each month in 2002. Public observing nights are in parentheses:

Crockett Park Observing Dates	
March	4 - 17 (16)
April	5 - 20 (20, Astronomy Day)
May	3 - 17 (4)
June	3 - 16 (15)
July	1 - 14 (13)
August	2 - 16 (10), 30
September	1 - 13 (7), 30
October	30 - 13 (12*), 28-31
November	1 - 10 (9), 29 - 30
December	1 - 13 (7)

* October 12 public viewing will be the Fall Star Party (Stargaze), currently planned for Franklin Park. Crockett is reserved as a backup location, should one be needed.

Club members may use these parks on the reserved nights without further notification. Other sites require that members make reservations ahead of time. Please familiarize yourself with each site's rules of use before going out.

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