

# Stargazing in Parks



Since mankind's earliest existence there has been a fundamental desire to understand the natural world, including the skies above. Ancient astronomers' initial understandings were basic; the movement of celestial bodies helped create early calendars, establish religious rites, assisted in determining the best time to plant crops and how to navigate upon the seas. From primitive Stonehenge and stone pyramids and temples in South America and the Middle East, these structures all had one thing in common -- they allowed an unobstructed view of the stars.

You'll find that same unobstructed view of the heavens at Observatory Park at Turner Farm, the Park Authority's specialized astronomy site in Great Falls. In fact, Turner Farm is in the process of becoming a designated International Dark Sky Place. In partnership with the Analemma Society, which fosters education through astronomy, the Park Authority has nurtured this special site that features a Roll-top Observatory with four telescopes under a retractable roof.

When skies are clear, the public is invited to peer through a telescope during after-hours viewing sessions almost every Friday night. Dr. Jeffrey Kretsch, an Analemma Society member and observatory park volunteer, recently noted in Reston Now, "I have been doing this awhile now, long enough that every once in a while, an adult comes up to me and says they remember coming as a child and how it inspired them to go on. That is what is the most rewarding."

The Park Authority's many astronomy programs, classes, camps and seminars at Observatory Park include telescope viewing, rainbows, sunrise and sunset phenomena, and meteorites. Seminar topics have covered planets, comets, open clusters, double stars, stellar color spectrum, globular clusters, galaxies and nebulae.

These programs are very popular and well received. One recent attendee with teens in tow wrote, "It was incredibly interesting! I was extremely impressed by the level of content provided. Everyone was intently engaged the whole time, young teens and adults. It was a great experience."

Systemwide, astronomy programs thrive. Huntley Meadows holds astronomy classes on the park's wetlands boardwalk. Riverbend Park stages a series of astronomy programs and festivals during winter months. Hidden Oaks Nature Center schedules night sky walks and campfire talks about ancient cultures and the night sky. Turner Farm offers three scouts astronomy merit badge programs as well.

To learn more or to register for programs, visit [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/astronomy](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/astronomy)

