Getting Started in Astronomy

The AAAP does not presently offer any formal astronomy training program, but the following list should get you on your way. Please realize that you do not need to follow all the suggestions. Just choose those that appeal to you. Delve only as deeply as you desire.

• **PLEASE DO NOT BEGIN BY BUYING A TELESCOPE!** If you already have one, fine, but astronomy can truly be enjoyed at any level of financial commitment, and it can become exceedingly expensive. Wait until you have spent enough time at it to confirm that you want to explore more deeply. The world is littered with hardware that sits idle because enthusiasm outpaced knowledge. Right out of the gate it is unlikely that you will be able to buy wisely or fully utilize what you have bought. Later on, you might find that a AAAP member already owns a scope you are considering, and you might be able to arrange a “test drive.”

• Take whatever binoculars you currently own and start to look at the night sky. If you don’t own any, buy a 7x42 or 7x50 model in a grade appropriate to your budget. The first number is the magnification power, and the second is the aperture or opening. Many people find much more than 7 power to be challenging to hold steady, but some can manage up to 10. Larger apertures, of course, let in more starlight. This will be your introduction to “aperture fever.” That is the attitude that whatever aperture you have is never enough, and more/bigger is always better. If you really become involved, you will probably buy other binoculars, but these first ones may well remain wide field favorites, plus they are great in daytime. All binoculars work best if you can recline in a lounge chair, perhaps one of the lay-flat "zero gravity" style.

• Choose one of the many astronomy apps available for your mobile device. Some of them can be held up against the sky to identify individual stars.

• Pick up a planisphere, a compact star atlas, and a book about binocular viewing. The “Star Wheel,” “Pocket Sky Atlas,” and “Binocular Highlights” offered by Sky & Telescope are inexpensive and excellent.

• Become a member of AAAP. The monthly speakers alone justify the modest cost of membership, and the level of astronomical and optical knowledge and experience among the members is most impressive. Become familiar with the AAAP website. (http://www.princetonastronomy.org/)

• Come out to the AAAP Simpson Observatory in Washington Crossing State Park on any cloudless Friday from April through October. The telescopes there are larger and more capable than what most of us own. (http://www.princetonastronomy.org/AAAP%20Simpson%20Observatory%20Map.jpg)

• Visit the New Jersey State Museum Planetarium in Trenton. It has displays and star shows year round, rain or shine, and offers a few special programs just for the AAAP. (https://www.nj.gov/state/museum/dos_museum_programs_planetarium.html)

• Read and learn on Cloudy Nights. Start with the Beginners and Binoculars Forums. (https://www.cloudynights.com/index)


• Sign up online for the daily email briefs from EarthSky News. (https://earthsky.org/tonight/)