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George Observatory opens for public viewing of Mars

HOUSTON — The George Observatory, located in Brazos Bend State Park, will be open to visitors on the night when Earth makes its closest approach to Mars on Aug. 27, 2003, when the distance between the planets is approximately 34,646,418 miles and on Aug. 28, when Mars will be at opposition and attain its greatest brilliancy. The Observatory will be open from 9 p.m. until midnight both nights. Visitors to the George Observatory will have assistance from volunteer amateur astronomers in viewing Mars through the three main telescopes.

This is the closest approach in 59,619 years, when in 57617 B.C. the planet came a bit closer and was slightly larger at a diameter of 25.13 arc seconds. The next record encounter, when Mars will come even closer than this year, will occur on Aug. 28, 2287, and its apparent diameter will be 25.14 arc seconds.

George Observatory astronomer Barbara Wilson said, “Mars will still look like a brilliant star to the naked eye. Mars is usually a small dot of 3 arc seconds and must be highly magnified and even then no details are seen. Now, with Mars 25 arc seconds in size, there will be visible features on the surface that most astronomers have never seen as long as it is magnified a great deal. For comparison, the full moon is 30 arc minutes across to the bare eye.”

Wilson has been observing Mars since 1986. She said, “Mars is an acquired taste. It is always tiny, even at this historic closest approach and most lay people will not have the observing skills to see much other than dark and light features on its surface and the polar cap. Indeed when you look at the moon all you see is light and dark features, with the bare eye. You can't see craters or mountains. Even with the most powerful telescopes on Earth, Mars will appear with shadings only, light and dark features and polar caps.”

Wilson said that there are many misconceptions regarding Mars that have been making the Internet rounds. She said that if you magnify Mars 72 times through a telescope, Mars will have an angular diameter of 1800 arc seconds, indeed the same as the full moon, **but don't expect to see Mars with the naked eye as big as the full moon is to the naked eye. And, there will still be great opportunities to view Mars every Saturday at the Observatory until the first week of October.**

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The George Observatory has three domed telescopes. The largest is the 36-inch, 10-ton Gueymard Research Telescope, one of the largest telescopes in the nation open to the public on a regular basis. There is a \$3 per person charge to enter Brazos Bend State Park, and a \$2 per person charge to view Mars through the Gueymard Telescope. Viewing through the two smaller Observatory telescopes is free and available on a first-come-first-served basis.

Used for inquiry and education, the telescopes at the Observatory allow both amateur and professional astronomers to conduct research, while visitors can gain first-hand knowledge of the beautiful and awe-inspiring sights of the night sky.

Wilson said, "Depending on the time of the month and the season of the year, visitors are able to observe a variety of phenomena, such as Saturn's rings, cloud belts on Jupiter, a partial or total eclipse of the Moon, a bright meteor or fireball that lights up the ground, the Milky Way, or a close pairing of two planets."

The George Observatory is a satellite facility of the Houston Museum of Natural Science and is open every Saturday, at 3 p.m. Tickets to view Mars will go on sale for \$2 at 5 p.m. for viewing through the Gueymard telescope. Viewing starts at nightfall.

Or, you can bring your own telescope to ponder "what's up there" on the George's observation deck. Volunteers will have telescopes set up where you can take a peek for free.

To reach Brazos Bend State Park, take US 59 south, past Sugarland, to the Crabb River Road exit. Turn left and follow the brown signs to the park.

For more information, call 281-242-3055 or logon to www.georgeobservatory.org

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