

Croydon Astronomical Society

Use of Sky Laser Pointers

Introduction

Use of a sky laser pointer can greatly enhance the enjoyment and learning of the night sky for visitors and fellow members to the observatory, such as in pointing out astronomical objects as well as constellations in the night sky. As there is potential danger the following applies - a section on Health & Safety and a section on operational use.

The Law

There is currently no law in the UK which prohibits the use of a laser pointer per se, colour or power. However, if they are used to distract or impede the safety of people or animals, vehicles, aircraft or shipping etc., then that action can be illegal and the perpetrator is liable to arrest and possible prosecution. Consequently, this is an activity in which the member must take care when using laser pointer devices, as its misuse is liable in law. Other laws may apply in inadvertent and negligent operation.

Using a sky laser pointer, H&S

It is difficult to describe all circumstances but the general principle for the use of a sky laser pointer is that it should only be pointed into the sky and only be used for the identification of astronomical objects. It must not be used close to or pointing to anyone or anything else.

Immediately before any member uses a sky laser pointer they should first conduct a quick risk assessment of their environment.

This risk assessment will involve the identification of the position of any aircraft - airplanes and helicopters etc. This will involve an assessment of the height of the aircraft, speed and direction. These factors will inform the member on where and when to use the laser pointer and when and where not to use it.

This assessment will also involve identifying the presence of wildlife such as birds and bats etc. Equal care should be afforded to wildlife as is given to humans. Some nocturnal animals have acute and highly sensitive eyesight and care must be afforded to such creatures.

This assessment will also involve a judgment of the group of visitors with the member. The reaction to the use of a sky laser pointer by senior citizens may be very different from that of an excited group of youngsters who may wish to put their hand in the beam or try to look into the beam. The member will have to take any appropriate action when using the sky laser pointer in such circumstances.

If involved with an outreach activity then the assessment will take into account the vicinity of buildings and in particular whether they are occupied and a consideration of their function. Users should be particularly mindful that any highly reflective surface can re-direct the laser beam in another direction and thus shining the beam at a mirror or similarly reflective surface must be avoided.

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The sky laser pointer should be kept safely on the member's person and not left lying around. The member will need to keep personal possession of the sky laser device at all times and be mindful of the likelihood of any attempted inappropriate use by a visitor should they pick up the member's sky laser pointer.

Members must inform any visitor who brings a laser pointer (or similar device) on site, that it cannot be used whilst on the observatory site or part of the group's activity.

Using a sky laser pointer, operation

The power switch must be of the momentary 'press against spring to power on, self powers off upon release of pressure'. It must not be modified to remain on unattended, such as the use of an elastic band.

For pointing by hand:

Hold the pointer at arm's length high in the air.

For pointing by telescope, through a finderscope or main eyepiece:

Wrap the fingers (optionally also use a thick dark cloth) around the laser and eyepiece, so as to fully block any stray light. Release the power switch before moving anything.

For pointing by telescope, attached and used as a 'finderpointer':

No particular technique.

Accountability

The group member must accept that the Croydon Astronomical Society will not accept any liability resulting from a member's misuse of their own or group's laser pointers.

Advice to the public

If a member of the public asks where we obtain our laser pointers, society members are advised to say that they have no personal knowledge (don't know) and should not allow themselves to be pressed into a conversation on this.