

CENTRE OPERATIONS MANUAL



Assembled by the National Council
THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

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Acknowledgements

The *Centre Operations Manual* was developed primarily as a source for Centres.

The first version was drafted by ED Randy Attwood in 2015; James Edgar, Colin Haig, and Charles Ennis contributed additional material. In September of 2017, the document was submitted to the Board for review, and later distributed to Centre Presidents and National Council for further review.

In late 2019 ED Dr. Phil Groff suggested that National Council take over completion of the document. In 2020, Karen Finstad reorganized the renamed Centre Operations Manual and asked for other NC representatives to assist in editing its five sections. Eric Briggs, Patrick Kelly, Judy Sterner and Michael Wilson volunteered to assist her. Other NC members contributed to the Manual: Judy Black, Alistair Ling, Dennis Lyons, Paul Sadler, Doug Thorp, and Lauri Roche.

Adoption & Revision History

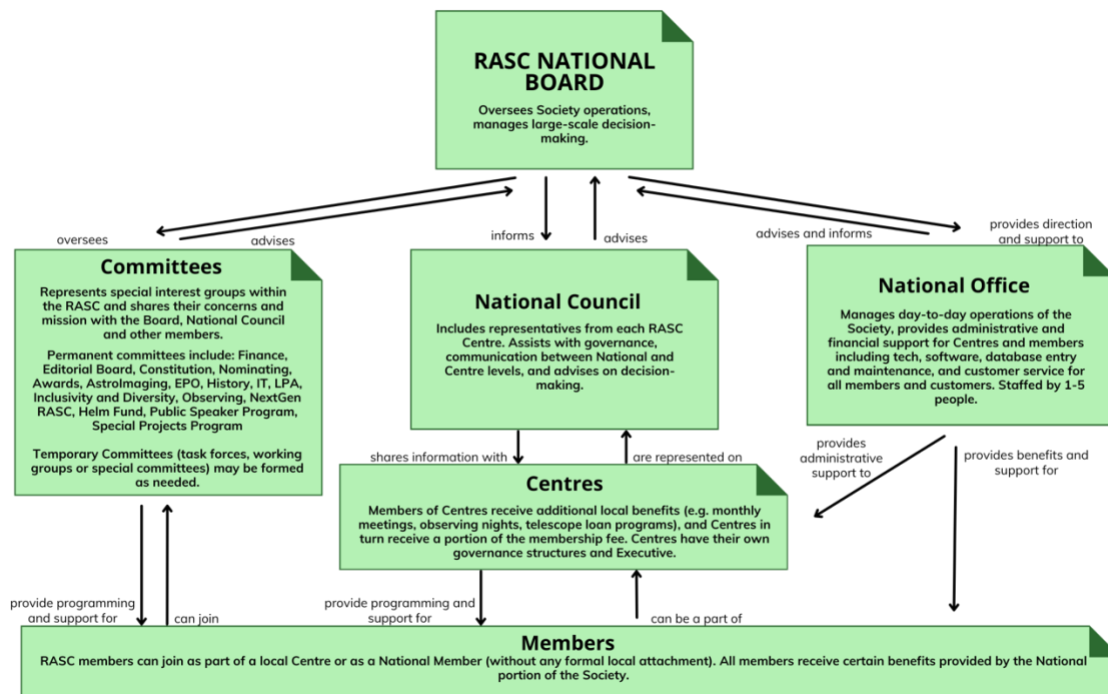
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1.0	November 27, 2023	J. Black	REVISION Draft edits. Compiled 5 sections of the manual. Appendices not included.
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Welcome to the RASC

This purpose of this handbook is to provide all RASC Centres with a written guide on best practices for running a Centre, as well as to provide information for people new to the job of running a Centre. It is also meant to share ideas amongst Centres on the several ways various activities can be organized. The National Council, with its representatives from each Centre, maintains a running conversation on best practices and good ideas, which inform this document and keep it up to date.

The figure below gives a quick overview of the organizational structure of the Society; this does not reflect the communications between the various components. Note that Centres are supported by a permanent staff at the Society Office, the National Council, Committees, and a Board of Directors who determine the policies which staff and volunteers then implement. For complete details, see our *RASC Bylaw No. 1* and *RASC Policy Manual*, which may be found on <https://www.rasc.ca/rasc-policy-manual>.

Table 1: RASC Organizational Structure



Each Centre functions as a local astronomy club for a specific geographical area – usually a city but sometimes a region or even an entire province or territory. Collectively we are a national astronomy organization consisting of 30 Centres from coast to coast. The life and strength of the Society lies in its Centres and in the experience they provide for members. Centres are run by volunteers who come and go, so it is important that knowledge is documented and passed down. We have over 150 years of history, and a deep reservoir of such knowledge, some of which we hope can be found in this document.

1. Running a Centre – the Basics

1.1 Requirements and Records

Administrative Requirements

According to the RASC Bylaw No. 1, each Centre “shall be administered by a governing body, which will consist of at least a President, a Secretary and a Treasurer.” This group administers the activities of the Centre and with its members sets its direction. In addition, each Centre is entitled to elect or appoint a representative to the National Council.

Legal requirements vary from province to province and differ for incorporated versus unincorporated Centres. Further, if you have charitable status, your operations will be subject to additional legislation. Each Centre is responsible for knowing and meeting the applicable legal requirements. Centre executives are legally accountable to see that all requirements are met.

At a minimum, each Centre should:

- Adopt a set of Bylaws which describe the key roles of your Centre, their duties and the policies they are to follow. This document is required by law if you are incorporated. All Centres’ bylaws are developed within the framework of *RASC Bylaw No. 1*. (https://rasc.ca/system/files/Bylaw_1.pdf which serves as the RASC constitution. Sample bylaws to Centres are available for adaptation at https://www.rasc.ca/system/files/Sample_Centre_Bylaws2016.pdf. The bylaws of Centre are available at <https://rasc.ca/centre-laws> and includes instances of both unincorporated Centres (e.g. <https://rasc.ca/sites/default/files/bylaw-okanagan.pdf>) and incorporated Centres (e.g. <https://rasc.ca/sites/default/files/incorporation-vancouver.pdf>) but may not be completely current.
- Keep full and complete records, including minutes of executive meetings (regular and in-camera) and annual meetings.
- Perform accounting duties to manage and report on funds; good financial stewardship is vital.
- Retain your records – financial records generally need to be kept for at least seven years.
- Hold an annual meeting, that includes presentation of reports by the President and/or Secretary, presentation of financial reports by the Treasurer, election of new directors, and selection of a National Council representative – refer to the Annual Meetings and Elections section below.
- Update the Society Office whenever there is a change in directors, and if incorporated, complete and submit the appropriate notice to the appropriate government agency.
- Incorporated Centres will also need to file an annual information return with Corporations Canada, and a tax return with Revenue Canada. Centres with Charitable Status need to file an annual Charitable Return with the Canada Revenue Agency. See the section below on Incorporation and Charitable Status.
- Open a bank account and keep your bank up to date on the names of officers, who has signing authority on the accounts, access to safety deposit box, etc. Similarly, if you have a P.O. box, keep the post office updated on who holds keys, and where notices for renewal fees are sent.
- Be familiar with and use the online tools provided by National to manage membership registration, fees, member donations, etc. This is job usually done by the Centre treasurer. More information can be found in *4.1: Administrative Help*.
- Report to National annually on your Centre’s finances and activities; this is required for inclusion in the Society’s formal Annual Report presented at our AGM. National also needs to be informed of all

your Education and Public Outreach activities including attendance, numbers of volunteer hours, etc.

- On an annual basis, a request will be made to the Presidents for each Centre to provide an activity report; the financial report will also be requested separate from the activity report. Details are below in *Annual Reporting*. This doesn't exist yet but hope springs eternal.

Storing Records

Please ensure you keep copies of important documents such as insurance or legal documents, incorporation documents, leases, bequests, provenance for artifacts, financial records including financial statements, bank records, cheque books and deposit books, invoices and receipts, and more. Many charitable organizations have suffered due to loss of documents, assets, or monies.

Permanent storage for important documents is advisable. Records stored in a member's basement get tossed into the recycling or lost during a move to a new house. Equipment that is on "temporary loan" is sometimes never seen again. Very important documents can get lost, like 99-year leases, bequests, observing logs, rare books, and more. Many Centres now have over 100 years of history, and unless that history is preserved, it is eventually forgotten.

Know that problems may occur, whether through simple mistakes, lost or forgotten information, mischief, or more serious matters caused by bad intentions or criminal activity. Remember the power of twos – it is always a good idea to ensure that there are two people that know things, two copies of keys, two signatures on cheques, two ways to get in touch, two copies of important documents, two people that cross-check each other's work, two people involved in making decisions, two people to communicate.

Annual Meetings and Elections

Your Centre Bylaws should spell out the requirements and process for annual meetings. Incorporated Centres are legally required to hold an annual meeting of their membership. Unincorporated Centres should do so as well, as it helps ensure transparency to the membership and encourage participation.

Make every effort to ensure all members are informed of the date of the Annual Meeting and its agenda at least 30 days in advance, or as required by the relevant legislation for incorporated Centres. Likewise, solicit nominations or calls for volunteers well in advance (60 days). Notice must have been given, typically 30-60 days in advance for Special Resolutions that are needed for Bylaw revisions and other matters that must be brought to the membership.

Here is a typical agenda:

1. Call to order
2. Welcome members and guests
3. Appointment of the chair of this meeting and any facilitators
4. Approval of the minutes from the prior (last year's) annual meeting
5. Any business related to the above
6. Annual reports:
 - President
 - Secretary
 - Treasurer, including approval of the financial statements of the prior year, approval of the budget for the next year, and approval of Centre fees, appointment of Auditor, etc.
 - Other directors, committees, etc.
7. Board business including special resolutions, business from members.

8. Election (or acclamation) of the board of directors or councillors, the National Council Representative(s), any committee chairs, etc., and confirmation of appointed positions
9. Other business
10. Adjournment

Insurance

RASC National currently arranges a Commercial General Liability (CGL) insurance policy that covers liability claims against RASC National and all listed RASC centres.

Refer to *4.1 Administrative Help* for details on public liability insurance provided by the Society. FAQs regarding insurance can be found on the RASC website: <https://www.rasc.ca/public-liability-insurance-information>.

Annual Reporting

In addition to the reports you provide to your Centre membership, each Centre is required to submit an annual report to the Society Office around the end of January, in time to be included in the Annual Report of the RASC. The report includes information about the Centre, its assets, outreach activities, Special Projects, list of elected Centre Executives, highlights, challenges, and looking forward. One or two images from your Centre is also welcomed. A separate financial statement is expected from your Treasurer. Centres that choose to incorporate or obtain charitable status, will have additional reporting requirements to their provincial and/or federal government, as mentioned under Administrative Requirements above.

It is important to record details of events, meetings, activities and financial statistics and to summarize them annually - not only for the sake of transparency, but to measure your accomplishments over time. Documenting membership growth, projects, events, fundraising successes etc. is also essential for grant applications or proposals, and to make requests of potential benefactors, donors, and community organizations that may assist your Centre in achieving its goals.

Your National Council Rep does have the opportunity to share with other Centres your successes and/or challenges through two mechanisms – the NC Forum and at regularly scheduled meetings in the standing agenda item *Centre Challenges and Successes*. The brain trust of the NC could help.

Incorporation and Charitable Status

Obtaining non-profit corporate status for your Centre is worth considering as it provides an operating structure, some liability protection for the directors, decreases personal risk for volunteers, and makes it easier to deal with other organizations. Once incorporated, a Centre is obliged to meet the legal requirements outlined by the appropriate government agency that regulates not-for-profit organizations. In addition to the initial cost, which can include legal and incidental fees, there is an ongoing administrative burden.

Qualifying for charitable status allows a Centre to issue tax receipts for donations but is rather more onerous to obtain, plus there are stringent rules and reporting for charities. If you commit the Centre to operate as a charity, you need to track the hours and type of charitable work completed, record funds raised and donors, issue tax receipts in a timely fashion, and file the annual charitable activities report with complete financial statements to the Canada Revenue Agency. You can't be lax, and the financial and legal penalties for noncompliance can be quite severe, including the seizure of assets. It is recommended that you obtain professional legal and financial advice (e.g., a lawyer and accountant).

In terms of fundraising possibilities, applying for grants, soliciting donations and giving charitable

receipts, many Centres conclude the extra work of incorporating and obtaining charitable status is well worth the extra paperwork. Some do not, and it may depend on the size of your Centre and community. Either way, be sure to communicate all the ramifications to your membership before asking for a ratification vote and approval of your new Bylaws, if required. If in doubt about how to proceed, check with the Society Office, and refer to your relevant provincial and federal government regulations.

Table 2 - Sources of information on incorporation

Alberta	https://www.alberta.ca/incorporate-a-non-profit
British Columbia	https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/business/not-for-profit-organizations
Manitoba	https://companiesoffice.gov.mb.ca/non_profit_corporations.html
Newfoundland & Labrador	https://www.gov.nl.ca/snl/registries/companies/corp-inc/
New Brunswick	https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services_renderer.631.Co-operative_(Co-ops)_Incorporation.html
Northwest Territories	https://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/en/non-profit-societies/
Nova Scotia	https://beta.novascotia.ca/incorporate-society
Nunavut	http://nunavutlegalregistries.ca/cr_forms_en.shtml
Ontario	https://www.ontario.ca/page/incorporate-not-profit
Prince Edward Island	https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/service/register-non-profit-corporation-pei
Quebec	http://www.registreentreprises.gouv.qc.ca/en/demarrer/constituer-pmsbl.aspx
Saskatchewan	https://www.saskculture.ca/programs/organizational-support/organizational-resources?resource-topic=13
Yukon	http://www.community.gov.yk.ca/corp/faq.html#nonprofitorg
Registering Charitable Status (Federal)	https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/registering-charitable-qualified-donee-status/apply-become-registered-charity.html
Online Fundraising	https://www.justgiving.com/?giving

1.2 Executive and Volunteer Roles¹

Centre Council or Board

Your Centre Bylaws should specify the size of your Board or Council, its officers, and the frequency of meetings. At a minimum, you need a President, Secretary and Treasurer. Usually there is also a Vice-

¹ See Appendix 1: Volunteering at the Ottawa Centre

President, and three or four councillors or directors; all must be paid-up Centre members elected by the membership, and you may wish to specify some other requirements such as minimum age.

In addition, each Centre elects one member at least 18 years of age to serve on the National Council; Centres may elect or appoint other representatives for each additional 200 members or part thereof.

There are additional legal eligibility requirements for officers and directors of incorporated Centres, which vary from province to province. Generally the person must be old enough to be responsible, must not be bankrupt, and without a criminal background. Your bylaws should specify the number of roles that can be held by any one person (e.g., President can't also be the Treasurer) and term limits for each position.

People skills, organizational skills and enthusiasm should all be considered when recruiting councillors and officers. When recruiting, be as specific as you can about the time commitment required, the number of hours, and meetings per year or per month.

Meetings are often scheduled quarterly or monthly and may be held online, at someone's house, the observatory, a meeting room at an office, library or other appropriate space. Follow the usual format for a business meeting and makes sure minutes are taken and retained.

Many councils do official business via email as well as in person. It's a good idea then, to establish procedures for holding votes and passing motions via email. For example, refer to *Policy B8: Board Voting Procedures*, in the *RASC Policy Manual* (see <https://www.rasc.ca/rasc-policy-manual>).

Other Roles

It takes a village to run a Centre. Your Centre Council or Board cannot and should not do all the work required. Volunteers will be needed to take charge of various organizational aspects of your activities. Generally, these positions are appointed, not elected. Roles might include A/V technician, librarian, observatory manager, event organizer, newsletter editor, webmaster, membership coordinator, meeting chairperson, outreach manager, and social convenor. You might wish to have a committee rather than a single person assigned to some ongoing tasks.

Then there are occasional helpers needed for public star parties and other outreach events, workshop instructors, presenters, grant writers, and so on. Frequent announcements and calls for volunteers to take on this kind of short-term commitment will increase your pool of potential takers for the more long-term roles.

People do step up to take on these jobs, especially if they are presented as part of the fun, not a chore. As a community, members value the experience provided by the group, and usually there are enough who wish to give back and do the work to keep things going. Be careful to rotate and refresh your volunteers, and to maintain communication with all members as to the ongoing needs and efforts being put forth on their behalf.

Developing Leaders and Improving Skills

Besides our good work in astronomy, the RASC has an interesting effect on its people. Whether intentional or not, we are creating leaders and improving skills of our members. These aren't just about being a better observer; they are transferable skills that improve personal and professional lives.

Many members join in search of social connection and a new hobby, and now they teach new members about the night sky or run events with dozens of people. Newsletter editors become better writers and get better at managing deadlines and contributors. Presenters become comfortable speaking in front of a group. Treasurers learn bookkeeping skills and the basics of finance. Presidents learn how to run a

meeting and how to herd the cats and keep it on track. Councillors learn better ways to manage conflict and build teams.

All of this valuable experience goes out into the world, but make sure some of it stays behind too. Your Centre's leaders and volunteers should document what they do, and how they do it, for their successors.

Responsibility & Best Practices

Most importantly, each volunteer, whether in a Centre council or board position or facing the public through education and outreach, is an Ambassador for the RASC. As such, they are expected to uphold the goals of the Society, and to follow its Policies – particularly those promoting a respectful, inclusive and safe environment for all. Centres should make sure all volunteers understand this, as well as the Centre's role in management of them and their understanding of their role.

This is particularly important for outreach volunteers presenting to the public and school groups, etc. In addition, outside organizations may require background screening or security checks for volunteers. Please make sure your Centre is aware and in compliance with all relevant laws and requirements.

Also refer to *3: Education and Public Outreach (EPO)* for additional information about best practices for volunteer management by Centres and for individual outreach volunteers.

Volunteer Recognition

There are many “unsung heroes” in every centre. Make sure you recognize them and their efforts. There are a lot of thankless jobs, and well-run centres will make a point of noticing and acknowledging the “low profile” people who give of their time and talents. Do not take your volunteers for granted. Name them, thank them, and monitor their levels of enthusiasm. Annual Meetings or Centre banquets are a good time to thank each volunteer and acknowledge their accomplishments and efforts.

You can also institute an awards program whereby significant achievements or lengths of service are formally rewarded. Plaques or pins provide concrete recognition.

Finally, we all know volunteers who remain in the same position for many years! Burn-out is always a danger, as is ossification. Be sure to leave space for graceful exits – this can be done with either formal or flexible term limits, or tactful invitations to take on a different role. Keep tabs on each volunteer and their willingness to continue.

1.3 Finances and Budgets

Membership Fees

Centre membership fees are comprised of a National and a Centre component; only the latter is set by the Centre itself and should be designed to cover the expected expenses of the Centre, not including services provided by National. Centres may have additional optional fees, such as for observatory keys, equipment lending fees, etc. The National portion pays for the Society office, its staff and a number of benefits – see *4: What the Society does for you*.

Fees are collected on behalf of each Centre by the Society Office in Toronto. Centres receive the centre portion of membership fees paid each month via direct deposit. Centres receive monthly reports from the Society Office detailing changes in the membership (new members, renewing members and changes in membership status such as address changes). For more details on how National handles registration, fees and reporting to the Centres, see *4.1: Administrative Help* below.

The RASC is a national not-for-profit incorporated charity, a status we applied for and received because of our educational services to the community. The status applies only at the national level and does not apply to individual Centres, who must incorporate or apply for charitable status separately. This means that no one owns the organization, that any profit the Society makes goes back into the corporation in pursuit of our stated goals. Although a charity, we are also a membership organization, and our members must receive fair benefit in return for membership fees, but their benefits cannot be subsidized by charitable donations.

Treasurer Role

This is a very important role in the Centre and has the most specific skill set. However, the required tasks can be greatly assisted with use of a basic financial accounting package such as Quicken or QuickBooks. There are also many online applications and even freeware versions, such as GnuCash.

A treasurer's basic tasks are to handle the money, keep records, and write reports. General principles are:

- record everything
- budget so the projected expenses don't exceed expected income
- keep a reserve for emergencies

Treasurer's reports and records should follow standard accounting practice, and here is where the accounting software is useful. The treasurer does not need to be a professional accountant but should commit to learning the basic principles. A number of sites offer on-line introductions such as <https://www.accountingcoach.com/accounting-principles/explanation>.

In particular for incorporated Centres and most especially charities, there is a requirement to have the financial books audited each year. Typically, an auditor is appointed by the Board or Council annually, and their official report made available to the membership.

Every year, Centres are asked to submit Treasurer's Reports. Reports from all Centres are consolidated and published in the Annual Report. The deadline is usually at the end of January or February. A blank copy of the Treasurer's Report can be found at the bottom of the [Centre Support](#) page of the RASC website (or <https://rasc.ca/centre-support>). You must be logged in to view the page.

Budgets

The Centre Treasurer, assisted by the Centre Council or Board, will put together an annual budget after the year-end financial reporting is done. Budgets provide guidance assistance to the incoming executive and help keep finances under control. The budget can be quite simple, simply listing expected revenue and expenses for the year, or broken down by calendar quarter or month.

The expense side is where many Centres struggle. There are fixed and variable costs. Fixed costs are those that don't vary with the number of members or activities. For example, liability insurance, venue rental, or server space. A variable expense would be postage, which multiplies quickly if you are sending newsletters and correspondence to members every month; in this case, an increased membership means more expense.

More advanced budgets will break down the revenue versus expense by quarter. This helps to understand cash-flow, how much money needs to come in to support the amount of money that is going out at a particular point in time. There are some things like knowing that most renewals come in September, and few in June, and so your club may be cash-starved in August.

Below is a sample budget for a hypothetical Centre.

Sample Budget Template (Line items for illustration only, actual line items will vary)

REVENUE

Membership fees	\$3,500.00
Event tickets	\$2,100.00
Observatory usage fees	\$310.00
Coffee fund	\$50.00
Telescope loan fees	\$75.00
RASC Calendar sales	\$800.00
Grants	\$1,200.00
Donations	\$350.00
TOTAL REVENUE	\$8,385.00

EXPENSE

Membership processing fee	\$60.00
Insurance	\$1,900.00
Cost of RASC Calendars	\$720.00
Meeting venue rental	\$360.00
Other meeting expenses	\$75.00
Guest speakers	\$1,200.00
Event costs	\$1,500.00
Library	\$125.00
Telescope Repair	\$300.00
Outreach Program	\$250.00
Web Hosting	\$250.00
Office Supplies and General Admin	\$100.00
Snow removal	\$200.00
Depreciation	\$950.00
TOTAL EXPENSE	\$7,990.00

PROJECTED PROFIT (LOSS)	\$395.00
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Facilities and Maintenance

Wise Centre leaders will plan for the future of their equipment and facilities. This means saving money specifically for repair and replacement of worn items, equipment, and facilities. The real cost of equipment is the purchase price, plus its maintenance. Budget at least 10% more than the purchase price for that maintenance, remembering there can be damage through unexpected events as well as regular use.

The simplest way is to calculate the cost to repair/replace an item, and divide that by its lifetime in months, and save that amount every month, and try not to dip into that cash for other operating needs. For example, a new roof for a roll-off observatory might cost \$3600 for shingle replacement. With a 10-year life, you should be putting aside \$360 a year, or \$30 a month. Bake this into your budget! This also is a worthy fundraising project, so start it early.

When Centres come into money through donations that aren't targeted to a specific purpose, it may be wise to set aside some of that for maintenance and repair.

2. Serving Members

2.1 Benefits & Responsibilities

Member Benefits

Current fees and membership categories may be found online (https://secure.rasc.ca/Portal/Membership/RASC/Membership/JOIN_10_MemberType.aspx).

Members of the Society receive the following benefits:

- A print copy of the Observer's Handbook and digital errata
- Access to the online versions of the *Journal of the RASC* (six issues) and the *Bulletin* (monthly)
- New Member's Kit (online)
- Participation in the RASC Observing Certificates Program: *Explore the Universe, Explore the Moon, Isabel Williamson Lunar Observing Program, Messier, Finest NGC Objects, Deep-Sky Gems, Deep-Sky Challenge, Astroimaging*
- Access to members-only portions of the National website (<https://www.rasc.ca>)
- Participation in the General Assembly and a voice at the Annual General Meeting

Centres may provide additional benefits to their members such as:

- Telescope loan or rental program
- Use of a Centre observatory and its equipment
- Access to a Centre library
- Participation in members-only observing events, workshops and social events
- Volunteer opportunities

NOTE: Handbooks are mailed in the early fall to existing members and later to new members who join between the mailing date and January 31 of the following year. New members joining February 1 or later are offered the current handbook at a discounted price (while supplies last) and will receive a new handbook during the next bulk mailing.

Inclusivity and Safety

The RASC wishes to create a welcoming environment for all cultures, genders and ages, and to encourage diversity and multiculturalism. Harassment, sexual or otherwise, is a form of misconduct that undermines the integrity of the Society and is not tolerated.

Centres should strive to create an inclusive environment that is safe for everyone and intolerant of inappropriate behavior. Be a role model. Handle problems with discretion, but firmly. Refer to the *G24: Anti-Harassment Policy* found in the [RASC Policy Manual](#) and the *Inclusivity and Diversity Committee Mandate* (<https://rasc.ca/committees/inclusivity>) for assistance and guidance.

The Society values respect for everyone and asks that members use common sense and consideration, think twice before using demeaning or offensive language and avoid unwanted touching.

Member Responsibilities

Members must abide by the RASC Bylaws and Policies of the Society and of their Centre.

2.2 Centre Meetings

Logistics of In-Person Meetings

Find a venue for Centre meetings that fits your budget and your requirements (seating, A/V equipment, computer(s) and internet access), such as a lecture hall, planetarium, church basement, library, Centre observatory, or other community meeting place. Wherever you meet, treat it with respect and consideration. Clean up after yourselves and thank your hosts at every opportunity – including the security guard or caretaker who lets you in and locks up afterward.

A two-hour meeting once a month is typical. Every Centre has its own meeting format and style, but generally there should be a chairperson or facilitator (aka MC) to keep things on schedule and engage the audience, who may be a mixed group of members, students and general public, in a friendly and welcoming manner. This MC will also welcome guests, new members, introduce the speakers, and run Q&A sessions.

Virtual Meetings and Other Online Practices

Internet access has become indispensable with the coming of Covid-19. Some Centres had already embraced the digital world through video recording of meetings or video conferencing, while others quickly adapted to ‘virtual’ meetings. Platforms such as Zoom, already used by the Society for Board, National Committees and National Council meetings, were adopted by many Centres for their Council and general meetings. Functions such as Webinars, Q&A or Chat enable the MC to conduct the meeting in a familiar format.

Familiarity with all equipment, platforms and capabilities, and programs is essential. Have a “bouncer” who is a co-host prepared to rapidly silence and remove the offending participant. Zoom tutorials are available on the RASC website (<https://www.rasc.ca/tutorials-centres>).

Some Centres regularly produce videos of their meetings, while others livestream and archive them on their Centre’s YouTube channels.

Content

Some aspect of astronomy is obviously going to be the central topic of each meeting. Amongst your members there are surely some knowledgeable speakers with stories to tell about their observing experiences, favourite astronomical topics, great astronomers of the past, astronomical travel, space exploration, and so on. Whether this is a single speaker and topic, or several short presentations, the level should be mindful of the audience. If your meeting includes aspects of a business meeting such as the reading of minutes, reports and motions, keep these informal, light in tone, and secondary to the main presentations.

Centre meetings do not need to include a formal lecture each month, here are some other ideas:

- Include RASCANADA YouTube presentations by RASC and many Centres <https://www.youtube.com/c/rascanada>
- Observer’s Corner - members share their images, sketches, stories, and discussions
- Techie Nights & Workshops – do-it-yourself electronics, optical projects, amateur telescope making, collimation, image processing, etc.

- Armchair Astronomy night or Astro Café – sociable discussion on a “hot topic” picked for the get-together
- Swap Meet – members bring eyepieces, mounts, scopes, books, software, etc., for sale or exchange or just showing off
- Kit Shop – Contact National Office regarding bulk order of RASC eStore items
- Mini Science Fair – set up a roomful of tables/booths for individual members to show off observing projects or equipment innovations, for the Centre to feature library books or telescopes available for loan, local telescope shops to flog their wares, etc.
- New Members Night - presentations on Centre programs, astronomy basics, RASC observing certificates, meet the Centre council, introduction to the observatory, find a buddy, etc.
- Social Events - a formal Banquet with speaker at a local restaurant or an informal picnic or barbecue at the Centre observatory

Extras

There are many ways to make your meetings fun, informative and social: have a welcome table at the entrance for new members and guests, announce the names of new members, run a door prize raffle, have a table selling RASC calendars or Centre clothing (T-shirts, hoodies, caps), serve coffee and cookies, free magazines from members who have finished reading them, have a post-meeting get-together at a nearby pub. Provide temporary nametags or offer (at a cost) permanent name badges.

2.3 Guest Speakers

Opportunities to hear professional astronomers or astronomy educators give a lecture is one of the great perks of being a RASC member. However, not every Centre has a research institution or university department handy to supply willing speakers or can afford the fees of some science popularizers. See 4.3: *Programs for Centres* for information on how the Society can help you find and pay expenses for external speakers through our *Public Speaker Program* and *Speaker Directory*. Don't forget that virtual or hybrid meetings allow for a much wider range of guest speakers!

Whether local members or special guests, do treat your speakers with utmost care and consideration. Make the arrangements well ahead of time and be specific about the expected audience, timing and their equipment availability. Thanking a speaker verbally and with applause and a thank-you letter is always appropriate. You may also wish to present them with a small memento of the visit, a commemorative plaque, a book, or other item. It is best to verify if this is permissible, as staff who work for public agencies, government and other organizations may be precluded from receiving gifts.

Plan Ahead

Set your meeting agendas for the whole year if you can, by booking speakers for the whole calendar year in advance. Confirm with the speaker a month in advance of the meeting, and the day before the meeting. In case of last-minute cancellation by the speaker, this will give you time to find an alternate. It's always a good idea to designate one person as the coordinator for speakers for the year, and to ensure they have backup and support from the rest of the team. That way, there is an accountable, responsible person for booking speakers, and they can ask for help, ideas, and recommendations from local Centre members and neighbouring Centres or the Society Office.

Certain special event lectures may call for more publicity than your normal meeting announcements provide. Letting the community know about a special astronomy lecture through social media, radio, newspapers, etc., is also good publicity for RASC and can result in new members. If you have donors or sponsors who have funded the special event, make use of every such opportunity to publicize their

name and sponsorship.

If you are planning to share a guest lecture via Zoom, and invite other Centres to participate, see the section on virtual meetings above, and also be sure to inform your speaker ahead of time as to how widely the live video lecture will be shared, and whether it will be archived.

Expenses and Fees

Centres often engage professors, researchers, industry professionals, teachers and members of your Centre or other Centres who would not expect a fee to speak to your group. In some cases, you may wish to offer an honorarium. However, the Centre should always be prepared to pay for any travel and lodging expenses. Designate a Centre member to shuttle your guest between airport, accommodation and meeting venue. Some Centres billet their guest, perhaps in the spare bedroom at a member's home. Others find a modestly priced but quality hotel. It is appropriate for the president to pay for the guest's meal the evening of the event, and to expense that.

Although some speakers will not expect a fee or honorarium, others who do this on a professional basis may charge a fee, and work through a booking agency. You need to be clear on this in advance as you don't want to receive a surprise invoice after the fact.

2.4 Recruiting & Retaining Members

Recruitment

Meetings and other public events can be publicized in Centre newsletters, on websites, and included in annual calendars posted in same. Contact local media to promote public lectures and observing events. Centres holding meetings in libraries or science centres may be able to promote events through these venues.

RASC promotional materials (*Moon Gazer's Guide**, *Star Finder**, and solar viewers) can be obtained from the Society Office and can be handed out by Centre volunteers, who are also available to answer questions. See <https://rasc.ca/brochures-and-outreach> for electronic examples of Centre brochures and for a Centre Membership presentation. A variety of social media platforms are used by Centres to publicize events, recruit, and retain members (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Meetup, Instagram, Vimeo).

*also available in French

New Members

Once they have joined, don't forget to ensure that new members feel welcome and are given opportunities to become actively involved. Here are some ideas:

- New members should be welcomed at regular meetings as well as in Centre newsletters, and perhaps contacted personally to answer any questions they may have about meetings or other centre activities. You can do this initially and again two to six months after joining.
- Produce a welcome handout or brochure detailing observatory procedures, library, etc., and contact info.
- Consider matching up new members who need help getting started in the hobby with a buddy or mentor.
- If you organize members-only events or workshops, issue direct invitations to newer members.
- Don't leave out the new members when recruiting volunteers for inreach and outreach

events, committees, work parties, special projects, etc.

Inreach

Member turnover is a problem for many Centres, so remember that even long-time members need care and watering – some call this ‘inreach’, as opposed to the outreach we do for non-members. Be aware that members often leave due to feeling uninvolved, apart from the central ‘clique’, a lack of diversity, or because they are not getting their money’s worth. Make sure you strive for a balance between outreach and inreach and give frequent reminders of the benefits and opportunities available to all members.

Education and Mentorship

People join the RASC because they are interested in astronomy, obviously, but many need guidance and the benefit of other’s experiences. Apart from meeting presentations, hands-on workshops can serve both inreach and outreach purposes if members of the general public are also invited.

a. Single or multi-session workshop ideas:

- New telescope owner
- Telescope repair clinic
- Eyepieces for Dummies
- Equipment demos
- Astroimaging
- Astrosketching

b. Workshops introducing the RASC observing certificates: *Explore the Universe, Explore the Moon (binocular and telescope), Isabel Williamson Lunar Observing Program (IWLOP), Messier Catalogue, Finest NGC Objects, Deep-Sky Gems, Deep-Sky Challenge, Astroimaging, Double Stars*. See 4.2: *Programs for Members* below.

c. Intro to astronomy classes, such as the NOVA program (refer to 4.3: *Programs for Centres*)

Of course, nothing beats getting outside under a clear dark sky as a group. The wonder, education, camaraderie, general sharing of expertise, or one-on-one training with your astro buddy is what we are all here for. Your Centre can organize:

- Meteor shower observing as a group
- Eclipse or occultation events
- Centre observatory orientation sessions
- A youth activity
- Members-only star parties
- A trip to a local dark-sky site or festival
- Virtual observing session for those unable to access a Centre observatory

Public star parties (from a single night to several) are also excellent training grounds (see section 3 *Education and Public Outreach (EPO)*). Newbies and oldies alike can learn much from watching and listening to an experienced telescope operator speaking to the wide range of people who come to look through our scopes at a public event. It takes judgement, patience and good humour to do this effectively. Some of our members are past masters; watch and learn.

Lending Equipment and Books

Many Centres hold common assets like a library and/or collections of telescopes and astronomical equipment (for loan or rent). Loaning books and equipment is wonderful for new members and those on limited budgets. Keeping records and being clear about loan terms is essential if items are not to be lost or damaged. There should be a sign-out procedure, and a librarian who catalogs the books or telescopes and reminds people to return items. The librarian should also cull redundant items, and perhaps offer them to other Centres or groups. Libraries can be augmented with member donations as well as new purchases.

One Centre lent out scopes with a “return it in better condition” policy, and the returned items would get cleaned, new covers, improved finder scopes, worn parts replaced, fresh batteries in the Telrad, or other improvements. Another Centre has a telescope rental program with a coordinator who supervises recordkeeping, repairs, and budget. Revenue from rentals sustains repair costs, replacement parts and expanding inventory to keep up with changes in technology. Checklists are a wonderful way to ensure that a scope that is borrowed comes back with all pieces and accessories, like eyepieces, finder scope, dew shield, mirror and lens covers. Recognize also that things will break, be worn out, or lost. Have a budget set aside for the repairs and maintenance.

2.5 Communicating with Members

Newsletters

Most Centres produce a monthly or bi-monthly newsletter available on the Centre website; some send email to members with a link to the current newsletter. See <https://www.rasc.ca/centre-newsletters> for list and archive of newsletters.

Websites, Online Forums & Lists

All Centres maintain websites (<https://www.rasc.ca/centres>)
Centres using various forms of social media (<https://www.rasc.ca/social-media>).
See individual Centre websites for details on local discussion lists, email groups, etc.

Email

Some Centres maintain email lists; refer to individual Centre websites.

Social Media

Most Centres subscribe to at least one social media platform such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Meetup, Snapchat, or Instagram (<https://www.rasc.ca/social-media>).

3. Education and Public Outreach (EPO)

3.1 Best Practices for EPO Volunteers: ‘Becoming a Volunteer’²

As a member of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada (RASC), you are encouraged to participate in Centre activities and volunteer your time to assist with EPO activities. If you are considering volunteering, let’s start with thank you!

Volunteers are representatives of the local Centre, RASC more broadly and, in many ways, of the entire astronomy community. This document is intended to recommend some best practices to help you be a good Ambassador of the hobby, the astronomy community, and our organization to enhance understanding and inspire curiosity about the Universe. All RASC activities are governed by the Bylaws and Policies of the Society and of each Centre, and you can be guided as a Volunteer by the core RASC values:

- Sharing knowledge and experience
- Collaboration and fellowship
- Enrichment of our community through diversity
- Discovery through the scientific method

The Society values respect for everyone and asks that members use common sense and consideration to help create a welcoming and safe environment for all cultures, genders and ages and to encourage diversity and inclusion.

RASC events must comply with all local laws and/or policies of our partner organizations. In some cases, this may mean that events serving the general public or vulnerable populations in particular might require a simple security clearance or background check for any volunteer. Your RASC Centre can advise you of the Centre’s or event’s requirements.

A welcoming and safe environment is one that not only creates an environment of wonder and discovery but also avoids behaviour that will diminish anyone’s interest in the hobby or our organization. Some best practices include creating:

- **Focused events** that concentrate primarily on astronomy and astronomy-related topics such as stars, planets, conjunctions, eclipses, equipment, and light-pollution abatement.
- **Safe activities** for guests that avoid health or safety risks and respect their person, such as asking permission of a parent or guardian before lifting a child onto a stool.
- **Family-friendly environments** for guests who might be sensitive to offensive language, smoking, or the use of alcohol or drugs.
- **Well-organized experiences** that are properly staffed throughout (i.e., by notifying the RASC event or volunteer coordinator if you cannot make it or might be late).

The success of our events often depends on our volunteers and you will be supported in your role. If you have any questions, ask your Centre’s event or volunteer coordinator for help!

² Thanks to Paul Sadler for contributing to this section.

3.2 Best Practices for EPO Volunteers: ‘Preparation’³

This section emphasizes the role of volunteers as Ambassadors of the hobby, the community, the Centre and the Society in creating focused events, safe activities, family-friendly environments, and well-organized experiences. As the success of many of our events depends on them succeeding in their role, there are corresponding roles for the RASC Centres in ensuring due diligence and good governance in establishing a positive and rewarding structure that supports our volunteers. While all RASC activities are governed by the Bylaws and Policies of the Society and of each Centre, Centres should consider some additional options for coordinating volunteers:

Pre-planning:

- Consider establishing a Volunteer Coordinator position for all Centre events, including maintaining a roster of willing volunteers.
- Ensure compliance with all local laws and policies of partners organizations related to background checks or security clearance and consider establishing a Centre policy that reflects these best practices, the best practice suggestions for volunteers themselves, and the Education and Public Outreach Committee’s statement on security, including considering background checks for all volunteers.
- Identify and arrange any particular training needs for volunteers, including at the minimum discussing the role of a good Ambassador in creating:
 - focused events (focused on astronomy, not personal views or agendas)
 - safe activities (avoiding safety or health concerns as well as zero tolerance for harassment or unwanted touching, and understanding some of the issues in dealing with vulnerable populations)
 - family-friendly environments (avoiding offensive language, smoking, or consuming drugs or alcohol for the event)
 - well-organized experiences (showing up, being on-time, etc.)
- Discuss conflict resolution options related to volunteers in case of either a problem during an event or a potential need to dismiss any volunteer that is not upholding the core values of RASC activities.

For each event:

- Identify a clear Centre event contact to resolve problems with either a volunteer or a guest.
- Identify a clear Centre contact for volunteers (may be the same as the event contact).
- Ensure a list of formally identified volunteers (i.e., not simply “whoever shows up”) for official governance and insurance purposes, and that all identified volunteers have complied with the local legal requirements, rules and procedures of any partner organization involved in the event, and the policies of the Centre. Because these requirements will differ from event to event, any potential volunteer who cannot or does not wish to comply with the rules and procedures established for an event cannot be a RASC volunteer for that event.

After an event:

Consider a feedback mechanism that could include public feedback received during and after events, reviewing outcomes from events, future training requirements, and other emerging best practices.

³ Thanks to Paul Sadler for contributing to this section.

3.3 General Public

Outreach Event Reports

Please report details of all your Centre outreach events to the Society Office on the Outreach Event Reporting form (<https://www.rasc.ca/rascforms/outreach-event-reporting>). We tabulate such things as volunteer hours and public served in order to inform our grantors and donors, and for Annual Reporting to the Society Office.

Public Star Parties

Amateur astronomers are well known for actively sharing their love of the night sky via public “star parties”. These might take place on a single evening in an urban or suburban site or involve one or more nights in a dark sky area. RASC members set up their telescopes and invite the public to view the skies. That first “eyepiece moment” is an opportunity to reconnect people with the universe and give them a new respect for the environment.

Whether one night or several, volunteers will be needed to set a date(s), book a suitable site, publicize the event, develop a program (speakers, sky tour, telescope clinic, etc.), supervise parking, educate visitors about the need for red light, and to deal with the unexpected.

Public Star Parties, and similar public publicly advertised events, are covered by the RASC General Liability insurance. Proof of insurance coverage is required. Refer to <https://www.rasc.ca/public-liability-insurance-information> for details and associated documents.

In 2018, the Ottawa Centre carried out a survey of public observing practises across the country. The results and analysis were written up in a report that can be found in *Appendix 2: Public Observing Practices*.

While the use of green laser pointers can be very useful at public observing events for pointing out constellations and particular objects in the night sky, they also represent a significant hazard to the safe operation of aircraft. There are now strict laws and regulations regarding their use. The RASC has partnered with Transport Canada to provide training to our members which will qualify them to legally use green laser pointers only under certain circumstances, and to educate the public on the hazards they represent. Refer to <https://www.rasc.ca/green-laser-pointer-usage> for more information.

Other Events

Other ways to connect with the public can be through public lectures, whether at regular Centre meetings or special events. You can offer introductory courses such as the NOVA Program (refer to *4.3: Programs for Centres*) or new telescope workshops advertised at the local telescope or optics store.

It’s a good idea to produce display boards and RASC brochures that you can trot out for special events (local festivals, science fairs, museum exhibits, etc.). Check with your local Centre to obtain these, if available.

Eclipses (solar or lunar) are great events to organize viewing sessions around as they may already receive a lot of publicity through various media. The safety of daytime solar observing must of course be carefully managed, for example by the distribution of solar viewing, see also <https://www.rasc.ca/eclipses>.

3.4 Special groups

Schools and Libraries

The RASC provides a range of resources for Centre volunteers looking for teaching aids and ideas (*Moon Gazer's Guide*, *Star Finder*, solar viewers) and publications (*Skyways: Astronomy Handbook for Teachers* by Mary Lou Whitehorne, also available in French; *Solar Observer's Handbook: A Guide to Beginners* by Charles Ennis). Also refer to:

- <https://www.rasc.ca/classroom-help>
- <https://www.rasc.ca/websites-and-apps>
- <https://www.rasc.ca/rasc-resources> (Resources from the RASC Centres)

Contact the Education & Public Outreach (EPO) Committee for additional resources. (<https://www.rasc.ca/committees/education>).

Set up a public library lending program with refurbished, donated telescopes or new scopes purchased and adapted for this purpose. The program will allow less privileged youth, financially challenged families, and those with an interest in astronomy who don't know how to start. The library can be assisted in creating or adding to their holdings on astronomy, bringing in Centre speakers and holding star parties.

Guides and Scouts

Local Boy Scout and Girl Guide groups have star badge programs with which you can assist. See the RASC website for details on Girl Guide Badge requirements (<https://www.rasc.ca/girl-guide-badge-requirements>) and Scouts Space Badge requirements (<https://www.rasc.ca/wolf-cub-badge-requirements>).

Often you will receive a request from such groups for observing sessions, or presentations. Local Air, Sea, and Army Cadet groups are often looking for instructors that can teach star navigation. Keep a list of willing presenters for when such requests come in, and regularly canvas your members to add to that list.

3.5 Media

Occasionally an astronomical event will prompt requests for information from the local media. Designate one person as your spokesperson, that way the media will get to know and trust that person. Keep in mind that news organizations have same-day deadlines, and if they contact you, you need to respond right away, or you may lose the opportunity.

Be prepared with relevant facts, anecdotes, and be sure of your sources of information. If you aren't comfortable answering a particular question, it's always fair to say, "that's outside of my area of expertise." Never say "no comment," Avoid bad language, personal opinions or commentary of a political, spiritual or other sensitive nature. You are speaking on behalf of the RASC. Be polite and courteous, upbeat and positive; friendly and smiling for photos and video.

Sometimes you will be the one seeking attention from the press, to publicize a special event such as a public lecture or star party. Build a list of local media contacts, including press, radio, TV, and other news outlets. Create a news release that includes the date, time, location and all other relevant information. If you have a web presence, place the information on front page of your

website of public Facebook page (or other platform) that explains the event in detail; that way the press can refer the public to it.

Apart from special events, remember to publicize your regular meetings where appropriate, including on social media and the internet. Consider contributing a “sky this month” article to local newspapers, and television or radio stations, which also advertises the upcoming events of your Centre. Small community newspapers look for content like this.

Regular and special events can be posted on Centre websites, email lists, in newsletters, and social media (see Section 2.5). They can also be posted on RASC sites: RASC eNews (rasc.ca/news), Centre Events and Astronomy events (<https://rasc.ca/search/node/centre%20events>), RASC Centre Meetings (<https://rasc.ca/search/node/centre%20meetings>), the *Bulletin* (rasc.ca/bulletin), Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

A word of warning about publicity via social media – remember anything and everything on the internet is forever, and your reputation is tied to what you’ve said. Be a good ambassador.

4. What the Society does for you

4.1 Administrative Help

Office Staff

The National Office staff provide services to the Centres – primarily handling memberships and finances. It maintains the member database and handles membership fees, Centre services, member benefits, the E-store, and more.

For the updated staff list and how to contact them, go to <https://www.rasc.ca/contact>.

Member Registration and Fee Collection

Membership fees are divided into two portions: National fee and Centre fee. The Board of Directors sets the National portion of the fee. Up-to-date fees are outlined in the RASC Policy Manual, available online at: <https://rasc.ca/rasc-policy-manual>. A more detailed breakdown of membership fee structure is also available in the Policy Manual.

Centres are free to set the Centre portion of the membership fee as they wish. Centres must inform office staff (admin@rasc.ca) of any changes to the Centre portion of the fee.

Once a month within the first two weeks of the month, National Office transfers any membership fees and Centre donations collected in the previous month to the Centre. This is calculated using the Centre Ledger feature in our database software.

Accessing Centre Member and Treasurer Information

Information helpful to Centres such as membership data and Centre Ledgers (Centre accounting information) is available through our online database system. Permissions to access this information are connected to your personal membership login and are instituted when your Centre's Executive changes.

Upon changing the Executive at your Centre, email the office staff (admin@rasc.ca) with the results of your Centre's election, and the staff will set up administrative access. For assistance with reporting, ledger information, etc., contact office staff.

Insurance

The RASC General Liability insurance covers events described as “normal RASC activities.” This covers members at events sponsored by a Centre or the Society, including publicly advertised events. Centres holding events in public parks, malls, etc., and are required to provide proof of insurance coverage, and should file a Certificate of Insurance Request. You can find the RASC Insurance FAQs and insurance request forms here: rasc.ca/public-liability-insurance-information

This policy does not respond to Property claims. Each Centre needs to arrange a separate policy to cover its own properties. For example: a Centre owns an observatory and holds events there. If a member of the public makes a liability claim against the Centre for a slip and fall during an event at the observatory, or damages to third party's property due to RASC centre's negligence, current CGL will respond as this is a liability matter. However, if the observatory takes on some damages due to fire, flood or other reasons, current CGL will not respond to property damages to owned property, this is where a separate

policy that the Centre has arranged for its listed properties will respond.

4.2 Programs for Members

Publications

Numerous publications are received as a benefit of membership (refer to *2.1 Benefits and Responsibilities*). The Society also develops, publishes and sells original books on various aspects of amateur astronomy and astronomical education, and an annual Observer's Calendar.

The Observer's Calendar, created by RASC members, contains comprehensive astronomical data such as daily Moon rise and set times, significant lunar and planetary conjunctions, eclipses, and meteor showers. Centres can obtain bulk orders of the Calendar for resale to their members and others. Contact the national office to find out how this can be done.

Images are solicited for the Observer's Calendar in spring of the year before publishing (e.g., in March 2024 for the 2025 calendar). There is a set of guidelines for submissions. Photos must meet the guidelines to be considered for publishing. Contact calendareditor@rasc.ca for more information or find out more on the submission page on the RASC website: <https://rasc.ca/calendarsubmissions>. Only RASC members can make submissions to the Calendar.

The Society produces a bi-monthly publication called the Journal. The Journal has a combination of scientific and more approachable content relating to astronomy, much of which is provided by our membership. To learn more about submitting articles or photos to the Journal, you can email the editor at editor@rasc.ca, or visit: <https://rasc.ca/journal>.

rasc.ca

The Society web site – www.rasc.ca – is a valuable resource. It is our connection to the public, to potential members and to our membership. It provides a way for people to learn about astronomy, join the Society, renew their membership and donate to the Society. There is also an online store selling books, calendars, guides, observing aids and promotional items: <https://secure.rasc.ca/store>.

Through a private section of the site, members have special access to a wide range of information on our programs, activities, history and governance. For members to access the RASC website, they will need to know their membership email address and password.

Centre executives also may access membership data and financial reports, which the Society manages for them on a secure site. To access the secure site, members will need to know their membership email address and password and be granted access.

The Society also has a Facebook Page and an X (formerly known as Twitter) account.

Email Discussion lists

All members are eligible to join our member discussion lists (some of which were replaced by online forums sometime in 2020). The most general of these lists is the RASCals, where members from across the country discuss topics of mutual interest. How to sign up for the various discussion groups, or forums, can be found on the RASC website (<https://secure.rasc.ca/membership/forums/home>).

Visual Observing Certificates

Members should be encouraged to work on the various observing and astroimaging certificate programs offered by the Society (www.rasc.ca/certificate-programs). A summary of the eight certificate programs would make a nice meeting presentation. Your Centre might consider organizing observing sessions

specifically around certificate requirements. Except for *Explore the Universe*, these programs are only available to RASC members. Full details on certificate requirements and how to apply may be found using the link above.

- ***Explore the Universe (EtU)***—A program for the new astronomer covering all major astronomical objects, including constellations, bright stars, the Moon, deep-sky objects, and double stars. The program can be completed by observing with the unaided eye and binoculars, but a small telescope may be used as well. The EtU certificate is available to all, members and non-members.

Submissions for the following programs will be accepted from RASC members only.

- ***Explore the Moon***—A beginner-level program based on the RASC Observer's Handbook lunar observing content, intended for those starting to observe with binoculars or telescopes.
- ***Messier Catalogue***—Follow Charles Messier's 18th century journey through the northern skies. His famous list of 110 "not comets" includes some of the most spectacular objects visible from mid-northern latitudes.
- ***Finest NGC Objects***—A slightly more difficult list for the experienced observer developed by RASC member Alan Dyer. The *Finest NGC Objects* includes a further 110 objects, mainly from the New General Catalogue.
- ***Isabel Williamson Lunar Observing Program (IWLOP)***—The RASC's lunar observing program for intermediate-to-advanced observers. It includes a comprehensive list of the best features visible on the surface of the Moon and detailed observing notes and explanations that will guide you through a complete tour of the amazing surface of our nearest neighbour in space.
- ***Deep-Sky Challenge***—This 45-object list will challenge even experienced observers and requires the use of both small wide-field instruments as well as large aperture to complete.
- ***Deep-Sky Gems***—A lengthy list containing many interesting, plus a few challenging, objects for all observers.
- ***Double Stars***—The list encourages intermediate visual observers to view a variety of doubles and multi-star systems using a small telescope.

Astroimaging Certificates

There are three astroimaging certificates for which members can apply. Submissions will be accepted from RASC members only. Details can be found on the RASC site at <https://www.rasc.ca/astro-imaging-certificate>

- ***RASC Astroimager – Wide-Field*** - A program to introduce beginners to many types of astronomical imaging, with an emphasis is on "skyscape" images, i.e., wide-field pictures that capture an astronomical object in the evening, dawn (or nighttime) sky that also include the landscape in the frame. Fifteen pictures are required for the certificate.
- ***RASC Astroimager – Solar System*** – A program to learn basic techniques of photographing Solar System objects, such as tracking, focusing, stacking, and image processing. Eight pictures are required for the certificate.
- ***RASC Astroimager – Deep Sky*** – Designed for astronomers to learn basic techniques for photographing a range of deep sky objects. Twelve pictures are required for the certificate.

Discover the Universe

This is training program offered by Canadian astronomers to help teachers or educators working with youth groups and educators. All activities and resources are offered online (www.rasc.ca/discover-universe). Two types of training are offered:

- **For teachers:** Based on school curriculum and include activities to do in class, teaching resources and tips on how to teach astronomy in a fun and innovative way.
- **For informal educators:** An emphasis on learning the night sky and on activities that can easily be done outside with little material.

The online workshops are conducted once a week, over a period of four to six weeks. An astronomy education professional will meet online for a one-hour webinar to present information and interact with participants. This webinar is always recorded for those who cannot join live. Participants also have some activities to do at their own pace throughout the workshop.

From time to time, special one-time presentations on specific astronomical topics are also offered, delivered by expert guest astronomers. All our workshops are also offered in French.

National Archive

The Society maintains extensive archives at its Toronto head office, managed by our National Archivist. The archive includes Society records, a rare book collection, meteorite collection, and small collections of Canadian-themed numismatic and philatelic materials, as well as astronomical instruments. Some of the collection has been digitized and is available online at rasc.ca. Access to the archives may be arranged by appointment through the Society Office or the National Archivist (<https://rasc.ca/contact/Archivist>).

Awards

The RASC grants a number of awards annually, based on merit for research, writing, education and public outreach, and service to the RASC community. The Awards Committee is charged with reviewing nominations for the Society's major awards and making recommendations to the Board, who will vote on the recipients. Nominations may be made by individual members or by Centres. For a full list of RASC awards and how to submit nominations, see rasc.ca/rasc-awards.

Robotic Telescope Data

The RASC briefly owned a Robotic Telescope situated in southern California. Raw astrophotography data from this telescope can be purchased online through the RASC eStore here:

<https://secure.rasc.ca/store/category/robotic-telescope-data>

Dorner Telescope Museum

Funded by a generous donor, the Dorner Telescope Museum's purpose is to tell the story of the telescope in Canada, through telling the stories of Canadian telescope makers, users, and their instruments. Currently in the design and acquisition phase, the telescope collection and exhibits will eventually have a permanent home that is open to the public are located at head office.

Current developments and a virtual catalogue may be found here: rasc.ca/dorner-telescope-museum.

4.3 Programs for Centres

Public Speaker Directory and Speaker Program

Finding speakers can be a challenge. The RASC Speaker Directory can help, with listings of people, topics, and how to get in touch. It is a service of the Society to help link qualified and enthusiastic astronomy speakers with your local Centre. You can find it on the web site here:

rasc.ca/find-speaker

Funding a speaking engagement can be a challenge. That is why the RASC created the Public Speaker Program (PSP), designed to cover the travel-related expenses for guest speakers speaking at an event that is open to the public. You need to apply in advance for approval. Details on the rules and how to get the PSP funds are located here: <https://www.rasc.ca/public-speaker-program>.

TIP: When you estimate costs for your PSP application, estimate on the high side. If your costs end up being less than what was approved, no problem. If they end up being more than what you got approved, then your Centre has to cover the difference.

NOVA

New Observers to Visual Astronomy (NOVA) is a package of course materials on introductory astronomy provided in pdf form, that has been provided courtesy of RASC Prince George Centre. A more detailed description and course materials may be found here: <https://rasc.ca/nova-program>.

Special Projects Program

The goal of the program is to make Society funds available for projects that further the RASC mandate, carried out by individual members or groups of members. Such projects may include but are not restricted to research projects (not connected with any academic institution), brochures or handouts, booklets, display materials, websites, workshops, classes, school visits, special lectures, GA travel for members who have had a paper accepted for presentation, support such as materials or field trips for elementary or secondary school students. Additional information can be found at <https://www.rasc.ca/special-projects-program>.

Ace Amateur Astronomer Certificate

The Ace Amateur Astronomer Program is a tool for binocular users to enhance the experience and value of an outreach evening. It's designed for presentation by one or more RASC members to provide a sky tour and to show participants how to find DSOs with binoculars. More information about the program can be found at this link:

https://www.rasc.ca/sites/default/files/The_Ace_Amateur_Astronomer_Programme.pdf

Green Laser Pointer (GLP) Training and Resources

The RASC has developed a voluntary GLP best-practice policy to promote the safe and responsible use of GLPs in astronomy education and outreach. The RASC has collaborated with Transport Canada to develop a training program for RASC members and have support documents to conduct such training. This and other GLP-related information can be found at <https://www.rasc.ca/green-laser-pointer-usage>.

5 Beyond the Basics

5.1 Centre Observatories

Many Centres have observatories (with or without a separate “clubhouse”) to provide dark viewing locations for the members. Usually this requires some capital funding, commonly through grants and donations (see 5.2: *External Fundraising*) but an equally important resource is the “sweat equity” from Centre members who have skills to design and build parts (or all) of the facility, including any landscaping.

Some of the major considerations for planning and maintaining these types of facilities are location, access, security, operating expenses, and management.

Location and Facilities

Ideally, a site should be far enough away from urban centres to provide a reasonably dark sky while also being close enough so that getting there and back does not take an inordinate amount of time. Most tend to be located from 15 to 75 km from “downtown”. Generally, the larger the city, the greater the distance.

Another important consideration is whether land can be purchased or leased. If leased, one should design the facility to allow for the case where the lease ends. It may be possible to move some assets of the observatory (assuming it is designed to be easily dismantled) but there may be certain items, such as concrete floor slabs, or sunken piers that would need to be left. Check with the local municipality over the zoning of the location, which may limit the types of things that can be built there. It may be possible to use a site that is in a municipal or provincial park (or other facility), often in exchange for doing public outreach.

Often sites and structures are determined by the astronomical equipment you wish to house, and vice versa. For ideas, see the RASC publication *Building a Small Observatory* by Charles Ennis.

Access and Security

Although a Centre may choose to use an observatory site for public outreach events, others designate theirs for member use only, and do not even advertise their location to the public. If you issue keys or lock combinations to members, be sure to change these occasionally to ensure that only those who should have access, do have access.

It is a good idea to ensure that observatory users are trained on opening and closing procedures before allowing independent access. Often site access and equipment (larger telescopes, CCD cameras, etc.) access require different levels of training by designated instructors. Some Centres require there be at least one member from a list of “observatory custodians” at the site when other members are present. Some also allow members to “sign in” non-members to use the facilities.

Don’t forget security measures for when the site is unattended. A well-constructed building with solid doors and barred windows may be sufficient. If the location is more remote, a strong gate across the entrance can also be an asset, as is being located in a park or other such location that has its own security. If the site has electricity, consider advanced security measures such as cameras or digital locks (users have unique passcodes, which can be logged).

Operating Expenses and Management

There will always be ongoing costs and labour associated with your observatory. These may include snow clearing, port-a-potties, tree trimming, grass cutting, as well as equipment repair and upgrades. Don't forget property insurance. Liability insurance coverage for Centre events is provided by National (refer to 4.1 – *Administrative Help*) but coverage for physical damage to Centre-owned property is their own responsibility.

Often the observatory operating expenses are covered as part of the regular Centre budget so no special fundraising is undertaken. However, some Centres have a surcharge on top of the regular Centre portion of the annual membership fee for this purpose. In other Centres, key holders (those who have access to the site and are usually its most frequent users) pay an annual fee to be able to access the site on their own. These costs can also be covered by general fundraising activities such as setting up a “good will box” at meetings and public events, or by selling Astro-photos taken by Centre members. Some Centres charge a nominal fee to groups (Scouts, Guides, etc.) that come to the site for outreach events.

Most Centres have a standing committee that is charged with observatory maintenance and upgrades. It is not unusual to have a member act as the manager to monitor it on a regular basis. Larger facilities may have smaller committees that look after more specific aspects of the site, such as Building and Grounds, Digital Infrastructure, Small Telescopes, etc.

5.2 External Fundraising

To raise money from outside your membership, you need to have a clear purpose and value proposition. You can't be vague in your request for a donation. It needs to have a clear cause.

Being a registered charity often helps motivate people to donate, as well as offering the benefit of tax receipts. Being a registered charity also allows you to participate in programs run by businesses that will match their employees' donations to a charity. It does come with strings attached - refer to Section 1.1 *Incorporation and Charitable Status* above.

For Centres that cannot issue tax receipts, it can help to suggest to prospective donors that they make a smaller donation which would be equivalent to a larger donation with a tax receipt.

Create a gift acceptance policy for your Centre. This is important to keep you free of litigation and simplify fundraising. You want to make sure that what is being donated is something your Centre is prepared to handle. If unsure, keep it simple and insist on cash donations. For an example, check out the Sunshine Coast Centres' policy here: sunshinecoastastronomy.wordpress.com/donate/

Put out donation jars at your monthly meetings or public talks, and at the entrance to your observatory or viewing sites. Put that donation jar out on the table at your booth at local fairs and civic events. Put up a banner showing what the public's donations will do to support your Centre. If you don't ask, you won't get.

There are many potential sources of funding for Centres. Here are some ideas:

- While not strictly an external source, our own **Special Projects Program** run by the national office may be used to fund certain types of projects; see 4.3 *Programs for Centres*.
- **Community Development Grants:** Community governments or associations often offer assistance to not-for-profit organizations to enhance their ability to provide programs,

services or activities that benefit the citizens of that community. Government grants at all levels can be appropriate for many of our outreach and public education-based activities.

- **Businesses:** It is worth canvassing local businesses, industries or industry councils who may be interested in funding specific projects, in return for the positive publicity. You could also ask for in-kind donations of building supplies or services – just be sure to acknowledge the donors in a prominent way.
- **Local Service Clubs:** Organizations such as the Rotary Club often fund community projects.
- **Crowd Funding:** Look into online crowd funding sites like GoFund Me or KickStarter to bring in funds for your special project.
- **Gaming Grants:** In some provinces, there are gaming grant programs. Your Centre can apply to receive a grant that is funded by the proceeds of provincially regulated gaming. These almost always have a requirement to provide a service to the community. If your Centre is close to casinos, you may be able to apply to supply volunteers for casino events with the proceeds of that event going to your Centre.

Alberta

<https://aqlc.ca/gaming>

British Columbia

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/sports-culture/gambling-fundraising/gaming-grants/community-gaming-grants>

Ontario

<https://otf.ca/>

5.3 General Assembly

Except in unusual circumstances, every year the Society holds a convention of its members, known as a “General Assembly” or “GA.” Usually held over a weekend in June or July, the GA is a wonderful opportunity to socialize with like-minded amateur astronomers from Centres across the country, attend special astronomical presentations, and be informed on the Society’s activities throughout the past year. Our General Assemblies have been a major part of the glue that holds our Society together, as a truly national cross-country astronomy club.

A typical virtual GA schedule might include a welcome event, member presentations, workshops, multiple special guest lecturers, winners of photo and sketching contests, and winners of RASC awards. Where in-person events contain these same elements, they may also include observatory visits, a barbecue, and other special post-GA tours may be arranged.

The GA is hosted by a Centre, Centres, or group of members as approved by the Board. Putting one on is a major project for any Centre but can provide a focus for engaging your members and drawing them together. NOTE: In 2020, it was demonstrated that a successful if reduced General Assembly and AGM may be held online, and a full GA was held in 2021-2023 entirely online.

A proposal to host the GA should be made to the RASC Board of Directors at least two years in advance and contain the following information:

- the names of the proposed host Centre, Centres, or group of members
- the proposed dates
- a plan for the accommodation of members of the Society attending the GA
- a proposed schedule of events (in-person, online, hybrid)

5.4 Annual General Meeting (AGM)

The COVID-19 pandemic affected when and how the RASC Annual General Meeting (AGM) is held. Since 2021, the RASC AGM has been held virtually and separate from the GA. Minutes of the AGM can be found on the RASC website (<https://www.rasc.ca/annual-meeting-minutes>).

5.5 Next Level Participation

As we are a national society, volunteers may serve beyond their local Centre and contribute at the national level in many ways.

The National Council (NC)

The NC represents and connects to the accumulated knowledge and experience held by RASC Centres across the country. The NC is primarily a council of Centres, facilitating the exchange of information across Centres on best practices for centre administration and centre-level programs. It also may be consulted by the Board of Directors, who may seek input to governance matters such as policies and budgets, though the NC no longer has a deciding vote in such matters which are solely the responsibility of the Board of Directors.

Each Centre of the Society is entitled to be represented on the National Council by one member of the Centre for each 200 (two hundred) members of the Centre, or portion thereof. In other words, if you have less than 200 members, you get one NC Representative, if you have 201 – 400 you get two.

The National Council normally meets by electronic means 6 times per year. In addition to attending meetings, a National Council Representative is asked to participate in discussions and projects, and to keep their Centre Council or Board and membership informed of national-level issues, initiatives and programs. NC Representatives are informed through meetings, minutes of meeting and special reports, and the NC National Forum.

Committees

The Society has established permanent committees whose purpose is to carry out, review, and manage the delivery of Society programs and services, as well as to ensure compliance with applicable legislation, Bylaws, and policies.

With a few exceptions (Finance, Nominating, Editorial Board), any member may serve on any committee, and doing so is a good introduction to service at the national level of RASC. If you are interested, refer to the terms of reference for each committee as given at <https://www.rasc.ca/committees>, and contact the current Chair.

These are the current RASC Committees that are open to members:

Astroimaging – designs and manages the certificate program for astrophotography and sketching

Awards – solicits and reviews nominations for the national awards program, recognizing members' service to the Society

Constitution – makes recommendations and manages changes to the Society's Bylaws at the national and Centre levels

Education & Public Outreach – develops resources and encourages cooperation and participation in public outreach efforts at all levels

History – maintains our extensive archives and promotes research into our history

Inclusivity and Diversity – promotes all types of equity and diversity within our membership through education and advocacy

Information Technology – provides technical support and advice to the Society office and to Centres

Light Pollution Abatement – promotes public education and advocacy for the abatement of light pollution

NextGen – promotes youth engagement and outreach at all levels

Observing – designs and administers education and observing certificate programs for members

Board of Directors

Our Directors are elected directly by the members of the Society, and are responsible for managing, or supervising the management of, the activities and affairs of the Society. Directors must be members, and ideally should have significant administrative or management experience in the fields of business, charitable or educational institutions, or other qualifications that are essential to the good management of the Society.

Prior participation in committees or the National Council are not essential but will give any members interested in serving on the Board a good introduction to how our Society operates.

5.6 Dealing with Conflict

Within any group of people there is potential for conflict.

Our meetings are free and open to the public. This introduces the possibility that unwanted visitors could attend. Make sure that you have a phone number to call if you need assistance. Does your facility have a security team?

Conflict that arises between members is another matter. The RASC is committed to creating and maintaining an organizational environment characterized by constructive, productive, and supportive relationships. We strive for fellowship, but personal interactions are complex and it can be expected that, from time to time, conflict will occur. When the participants in the conflict are unable to resolve the issue quickly and satisfactorily themselves, a conflict resolution policy exists to guide members and staff towards resolution where that is possible. Centres are encouraged to make themselves familiar with the *RASC Policy G23: Conflict and Complaint Resolution* in the *RASC Policy Manual* (<https://www.rasc.ca/rasc-policy-manual>).

This policy suggests that conflicts be resolved at the lowest organizational level wherever possible, and with confidentiality. Only if these efforts fail, should the matter be raised to the next level, in the manner outlined in the Policy. In all cases, an expeditious resolution of conflict is urged, to reduce unnecessary suffering or to prevent further conflict.

RASC Centres are also encouraged to develop their own policy to address conflict and its resolution within their Centre.

Appendix 1: Volunteering at the Ottawa Centre

Consider the following member activities: Monthly meetings; the Fred Lossing observatory and star parties; the public stargazing program; the outreach program; the telescope lending library; the astronomy book library; telescope clinics; AstroNotes; our web site; and the annual member dinner. None of this would happen without the volunteers who have stepped forward, unleashing their creative talents and sharing their time. This may sound like a very strong statement, but it is true; all the programs you see in the Ottawa Centre are a result of the dedicated work of volunteers.

So why do members volunteer at the Ottawa Centre? We have asked this question of volunteers many times. We encounter the following answers over and over:

- *“I want to contribute. I have benefited from the RASC and I like giving back”.*
- *“It is personally rewarding to me”.*
- *“I have certain skills and like to offer them to the RASC”.*
- *“I volunteered because I wanted to take my involvement with the RASC to another level.”*
- *“I like being around people who care about astronomy and care about sharing it with others. It is very motivational”.*

And why do people NOT volunteer?

- *“it will take up too much time”*
- *“I’m too busy”*
- *“Someone else will do it”*
- *“I don’t know enough about it”*
- *“I’m not a leader”*

New members often approach us and ask how they can contribute as a volunteer. In this article, we will answer this question.

How do I find out about Ottawa Centre programs and areas where I can volunteer?

All the programs noted above are described on the Ottawa.rasc.ca website. We strive to keep it current so that members can have a broad awareness of the programs that are offered.

A second way to stay plugged in is by attending the Ottawa Centre monthly meetings. There is a lot of thought put into the content of the meetings and the announcements that are made every month. Look at the people who contribute - the meeting chair, the people who deliver talks and so on. These are volunteers. We also make announcements about vacancies in our volunteer programs at the meetings.

A third way to learn about Ottawa Centre programs and volunteer opportunities is by reading AstroNotes, our Centre newsletter – what you are reading now! Each issue is jam-packed with topics that typically arise from member activities. Each contributor is a volunteer who had an idea and desire to share something.

There is something especially noteworthy in each issue of AstroNotes. Scroll to the end of AstroNotes, where you will see a description of the current Ottawa Centre Council. The Council is another area where you can contribute as a volunteer. The remainder of this article will review Council positions and opportunities for members.

The RASC Ottawa Centre Council – what does it do?

The Council is responsible for the oversight and the administration of the operations of the Ottawa Centre. Our Centre is officially designated as a charitable organization. To maintain our charitable status and function as a Centre within the RASC, we must have several elected officers to provide governance and oversight of finances. The Council must operate according to the Ottawa Centre Bylaws, which is essentially the constitution of the Ottawa Centre.

Council also has a strategic orientation. There are regular discussions about our Centre's vision and where we are headed with member programs and benefits.

There are two categories of Council members: Elected members and appointed members. The roles of each member will be described next. As you read the descriptions of these roles, please keep in mind that they are filled by volunteers.

Elected members of Council

The elected members of the Ottawa Centre include the:

- **President**, who represents the Ottawa Centre and presides over Council meetings.
- **Vice-President**, who supports the President of the Centre, especially when the President is unavailable to fulfill her/his duties. She/he also organizes the Annual Dinner Meeting.
- **Secretary**, who is essentially the chief administrator of the Centre. The duties are outlined in the Centre Bylaws.
- **Treasurer**, who manages and reports on Centres finances.
- **Centre Meeting chair**, who organizes the content of the monthly meetings and runs the meetings.
- **Councillors**, who act as advisors and provide valuable input to the operations of the Ottawa Centre.
- **National Council representatives**, who are the Centre liaisons to the national office of the RASC.

The term of elected members is one year. In particular, no one may hold the office of President, Vice-President or Meeting Chair for more than two consecutive years. An election is held at the annual general meeting.

Appointed members of Council

The appointed members of Council appointed members include the:

- **Observatory director**, who is responsible for the operation, maintenance and safekeeping of the Centre's observatory(ies) and observatory programs.
- **AstroNotes Editor**, who is responsible for the publication of the Centre newsletter.
- **Webmaster**, who is responsible for the development and maintenance of the Centre's website.
- **Librarian**, who is responsible for operating the library and the safekeeping of the library assets. Currently, the Ottawa Centre has two libraries: the Stan Mott Astronomy Book library and the Ted Bean Astronomy telescope library.

In summary, there are many areas where members can contribute as volunteers on Council. If you have ideas on growing our Centre or adding new programs, please consider volunteering on Council.

Additional Volunteer Opportunities

As our Centre grows and evolves, new volunteer opportunities will arise. In fact, as we write this a discussion is evolving about a completely new opportunity that we may be able to offer our members by

next spring if everything comes together. Fortunately for us, the Ottawa Centre has a lot of talented members who have much to contribute.

Why Not You?

Most people shy away from volunteering because they feel it will take up too much of their time and/or they do not feel they have the necessary knowledge to help. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a councillor you only have four meetings a year, each scheduled for about two hours (although with the meeting after the meeting you might want to block off three hours). Aside from that there is the occasional email discussion. If you take on a project, which is entirely up to you, you possibly need to dedicate more time. Some positions might require a few hours a month, but others are only a few hours a year.

Of all the people we have ever spoken to who have volunteered, not one has ever regretted it. All have said that they have gotten more out of doing it than they ever put in. They also say that they are more aware and get more out of their involvement. Remember, it is your unique perspective that keeps our Centre, fresh, current and moving forward. We need your vision.

Want to talk about this more about volunteer opportunities? Please feel free to contact anyone on Council (remember – go to the end of *AstroNotes* to see the names of current Council members).

Gordon Webster and Mike Moghadam

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Appendix 2: Results from the National Survey of Other Centres, March 2018

I wanted to reach out to the other RASC Centres and see if there were any “lessons learned” from their efforts that would help me in my new role as public star party coordinator for Ottawa Centre. So, I gave a heads-up to our Centre Council and then went through the RASC National website, pulling up the 28 centres listed, ignoring ours, getting a bit confused about the status of one of them, and reaching out by email or website links to the remaining 26 Centres.

I was just planning to send a quick little email to the Star Party Coordinators at the other Centres, tell them I was the Ottawa coordinator, and ask them if they wanted to take part in the design and/or final little survey. I thought it would be good to have them help with finalizing the questions to improve the survey, but before I even got that far, the comparative learning started.

I only have experience with Ottawa Centre, and I just assumed everyone had what we had — monthly “Star Parties” (i.e. public observing parties once a month). For Ottawa, that means a suburban site on the edge of town at a municipal library site that lets us turn off the parking lot lights for an evening of public viewing. Members come out with their scopes, some other informal astronomy group members come out too, and the public comes by to stargaze. It’s not a “dark-sky site”, but less light-polluted than downtown. On a good night, we might have 25-30 scopes, including a beast of a scope from one member, and up to 300 people through the course of the night.

We also have a members-only observatory farther out-of-town, plus occasional pop-up sidewalk astronomy events by the local astronomy members (often who are also RASC members) near Chapters bookstores with high foot traffic (also up to 300 people).

In addition, there are special events like the eclipse (we overflowed the entire neighbourhood at the Canadian Aviation and Space Museum!) and International Astronomy Day as full RASC events. And while we don’t have a “dark-sky” site under RASC, there are some darker observing sites to which individual members organize small outings from time to time, or impromptu Messier marathons in nearby settings.

But I thought the “Star Parties” i.e. the monthly public viewing events would be in every Centre, and it would be easy to figure out who the coordinator was so I could contact them. It was an early eye-opener looking at what the Centres actually offered.

Some of the Centres had “public observing” people, others did not. Some had “observing chairs”, but that tended to be the ones looking after the Certificate programs. Others had outreach people, but no observing events listed. Or at least not with names attached. Some had local observatories and did everything there, complete with public viewing through the big scopes; others were focused on sidewalk events, with high foot traffic, and had huge success with moon observing.

For many, the term “Star Party” was much loftier — the annual “big” star parties with camping, multiple days, exhibits, demonstrations, often near dark-sky zones. Some of my emails were routed to different coordinators, depending on how they interpreted my description at the initial contact. In the end, about a dozen centres responded and wanted to participate. I sent them some draft questions, got some feedback to tweak a few questions, and we were ready to launch.

However, while I might have lofty goals about making it an annual survey or having a small informal network of public viewing coordinators to share info and success stories, it was also interesting to see some of the other interests that popped up. Some were wondering if we could add a bunch of questions about outreach events, membership drives, ongoing meeting management, etc. As I was trying to “stay in my lane” related to public viewing events, I had to decline to include those areas right now. Interesting, useful, and potentially illuminating, but beyond the scope of my little survey effort.

Question 1 — Which Centres?

Including my own answers for Ottawa, we had 13 Centres participating. These were:

- Atlantic: St. John’s (Newfoundland), New Brunswick
- Central: Montreal, Ottawa, Niagara, Toronto, Hamilton, Sarnia, Windsor
- Western/Northern: Winnipeg, Okanagan, Victoria, Sunshine Coast.

I used Survey Monkey for the survey and broke it into two surveys (the limit on free surveys is only ten questions and I had seventeen in total). Most Centres used the website link to respond. Two printed out the surveys and discussed them as a group within their Centre, and then sent me detailed responses. And two other Centres (not listed) sent me some general info about their offerings, which while interesting and helpful to me, didn’t really fit within the survey questions and so don’t show up in the formal survey results below.

Question 2 — What does the Centre offer?

This was my initial scoping question (no pun intended) to try to get us all using the same terminology for the survey. I created 8 sub options, although some overlapped, and the results were as follows:

- a. Occasional or regular public outreach events (with no viewing, just presentations or lectures): 76.92%.
- b. Occasional public viewing events (such as for an eclipse or conjunction event): 84.62%.
- c. Regularly scheduled public viewing parties (more than four times a year): 61.54%.
- d. Ongoing public viewing events (such as at an observatory that is open regularly, maybe even weekly): 30.77%.
- d. Occasional or regular members-only meetings (with no viewing, just presentations and lectures, Centre management, etc.): 38.46%.
- e. Occasional members-only observing events: 46.15%.
- f. Regularly scheduled members-only observing events (more than four times a year): 53.85%.
- g. Ongoing members-only observing events (such as an observatory or dark-sky site for members-only use): 53.85%.

For me, the meat was in (c), (d), and (g). Sixty percent of Centres are offering regular public viewing parties, the equivalent of what I coordinate for Ottawa Centre. Of those, 30% or so have them as ongoing events at an observatory for example. When we limit it to members-only observing, just over 50% of the Centres are doing regular events.

This was one of the questions that the various Centres helped with tweaking when I was designing the survey, in part because some of them noted that when there was success with events, it was almost always correlated with cross-promotion between the events. Members going to members-only events also saw the public events, and there was a schedule so they didn’t conflict or overlap.

It was also interesting to see in (a) and (e) the level of support offered for events that are non-observing occasions. That is a bit beyond my purview, but still interesting. In the open comment box after the

question, some noted that their monthly meetings are open to the public, so there isn't a difference in the two for them. I also found it interesting that one had some had public talks or their monthly meeting immediately followed by observing at the same site, which was not something I had seen listed in many RASC groups, although it did show up in my internet research in more informal astronomy groups.

Question 3 — How often do Centres offer public observing?

My obvious bias in the choice of questions is plain in the ordering of the questions — the public observing events is the area of most interest to me, and the reason I did the survey, so I asked the previous question and this one right up front. I was quite surprised to see the full range of responses:

- Less than 3 times a year or not a set schedule: 23.08%
- Regularly (4 or more times a year AND a set schedule): 23.08%
- Monthly for part of the year (set schedule announced in advance, even if not the whole year): 38.46%
- Monthly all year (weather permitting of course): 23.08%

In Ottawa, we don't do public observing events in the winter months (December to March) but there are some members-only events at the observatory with its warming room. I was a little surprised that the Centres are pretty much evenly distributed across the spectrum (less than 3, 4+, 6-8, or 12); I expected more clumping of results.

Question 4 — Where do you offer public observing?

In Ottawa, our RASC-affiliated public observing is generally limited to the monthly star party or a special event (like an eclipse) and only in a couple of very specific i.e. pre-set locations. I was curious to see what other Centres used as their locations:

- Sidewalk astronomy — pop up events that happen in different locations around the urban setting: 46.15%.
- Urban astronomy — urban viewing always in one location in the city: 15.38%.
- Suburban astronomy in various locations: 7.69%.
- Suburban astronomy in a set location (park, field, parking lot, etc.): 69.23%.
- At an observatory location but without the use of the scope (i.e. co-location): 0.00%.
- Viewing at a permanent observatory (including offering views through the permanent scope): 46.15%.
- Dark-sky site — viewing at a dark-sky location: 61.54%.

Note that this is ONLY about public observing, not members-only too. The results were fascinating. While there are some sidewalk astronomy events in Ottawa, as noted above, they are organized by non-RASC groups around Ottawa (although many of the members are also RASC members).

However, almost 50% of the Centres are doing these events (and a number noted the level of success with them, particularly for moon observing). However, 70% have options similar to Ottawa — a suburban location in a set location (for us, a library parking lot). However, I was filled with some jealousy to see public viewing options (almost 50%) at a permanent observatory and 60% at a dark-sky location. We just don't have the local areas to either support full public events or close enough to make them feasible.

Question 5 — Drilling down on Sidewalk Astronomy

For the next question, I wanted to drill down a bit on the details around those Centres that had sidewalk astronomy events. I didn't want a series of separate questions, so I cheated a bit and grouped a few in one question with a "select all that apply" option. In the first set of five options, I wanted to see whether the sidewalk stuff moved around or was always in one location:

- There are no sidewalk events: 38.46%.
- RASC isn't involved but other groups do some sidewalk events: 0% (* collapsed with the next option)
- RASC members attend, but informal groups organize sidewalk events: 23.08%.
- RASC partners with other organizations for some sidewalk events: 46.15%.
- There are RASC-led sidewalk events: 23.08%.

This one surprised me. I kind of expected that the informal nature of the “pop-up” events would mean it was done by more informal groups than a RASC centre. Since almost a quarter are doing them as formal RASC events or half in conjunction with other organizations, we're considering at least a bit more support for the notifications than in the past. I've added them as dates TBA in our formal list of RASC events for the year, and even suggested a couple of months where they might be in specific sections of the City. Equally, we're considering a blitz night where we might do four or five locations in one night, but the details will need to be worked out to see if it is feasible or not. In Ottawa, there are non-RASC groups that hold some on the East and West ends of the city, but there was interest in having some events more Central or South too.

The stats are a bit wonky for the next few areas because the people above who had no sidewalk events (40%) wouldn't need to answer these, but because of the way I grouped them, they would show up as part of the percentage anyway (i.e. it isn't a subset, it is as a percentage of all Centres responding, whether they have events or not). I wanted to know how much notice is given — are they announced in advance, very formal planning, or more spontaneous such as “Hey, tomorrow night looks good, let's go for it!”.

- Sidewalk events are informal and happen spontaneously (one day's notice, for instance): 23.08% (or 37.5% of those who have sidewalk events).
- Sidewalk events are formal, scheduled, and announced in advance: 38.46% (or 62.5% of those who have events).

Again, I was surprised. Most of the reading I did online about organizing sidewalk events were more about short-notice spontaneous events. Instead, almost two-thirds of the RASC sidewalk events are pre-scheduled. However, at the moment, since RASC Ottawa doesn't organize them, it would be hard to “force” a schedule upon the Ottawa organizers if they prefer more spontaneous events.

- Sidewalk events happen several times a month: 7.69% (12.5% of those having events).
- Sidewalk events happen once a month: 15.38% (25% of those having events).
- Sidewalk events happen sporadically: 38.46% (62.5 of those having events).

It is hard to reconcile this result with the previous one — normally if they are pre-announced, they would have a more formal schedule, but they were both spontaneous AND organized, apparently. Finally, I wanted to check if they moved around or were in the same location:

- Sidewalk events happen in the same place every time: 15.38% (or about 28% of those having events)
- Sidewalk events move around: 38.46% (or about 72% of those having events).

Again, I was surprised. Many of the informal sidewalk events that I read about on the internet sites started off moving around, but eventually found a single location that worked well. However, the RASC Centres are apparently still moving theirs around.

Expanding the focus on public observing (other than sidewalk events)

Since I am mostly interested in the public observing events that resemble the Ottawa parties, I wanted to ask a series of questions about “what else is out there” that other Centres were doing or had in their toolkits that Ottawa did not have available. Generally, I grouped the questions around infrastructure, supports, themes, and rooms adjacent to the group (an area added by one of the other Centres).

Question 6 – Public Observing Infrastructure

Our setup in Ottawa is pretty low-key. We have a parking lot to use in a suburb with a great Western view, and a stream-lined event process — we announce, we set up, people show up, we observe, we pack up, we go home. There’s a little bit of signage, and good parking, nothing else. So, I wanted to know what others offered:

- Washrooms in a building: 50.00%.
- Portable washrooms already on site: 16.67%.
- Portable washrooms provided by the Centre: 25.00%.

In other words, roughly 80%+ have washrooms. Definitely something for us to look into in Ottawa.

- Dedicated parking lot: 75.00%.
- Parking controls around how “close” members can park to the viewing area for unloading/loading and at what times: 50.00%.
- Light barrier to block headlights from spilling into the viewing area: 8.33%.

One of the biggest irritants we have at the monthly Ottawa events is that we are using the edge of the parking lot, so all the cars that park in the adjoining rows often shine their headlights directly towards us as they are arriving or leaving. We ask them to park facing away, but there are still backup lights, parking lights, interior lights, etc., and all in cars being driven by relative newbies who don’t know that some of the members who are more passionate about light pollution are ready to rumble if a member’s battery power pack even has an unshielded red light on it. (Down with the pitchforks, I’m only gently mocking!). I was surprised that only one Centre has an actual light barrier to block such light. We don’t have a solution yet, but it’s on the list to explore this year. A simple rope could be strung from lamppost to lamp-post and with tarps hanging off it, but they would likely flap in the wind or need to be tied down, which might create a safety hazard. If people have ideas, I’d welcome hearing of them.

- Time limits on the event (we can only go until 12:30 at our site): 33.33%;
- Kiosk or table for information or membership: 25.00%;
- Formal signage: 66.67%;
- ID badges for all members: 25.00%;
- Strict rules around use of white light (phones), light pens (even for guests), or not smoking: 41.67%;
- Event marshals who help with any initial setup (in Ottawa, our “marshals” turn off the parking lot lights as well as the building lights in the library, put up signage): 33.33%.

I was a bit surprised that there are not more Centres using “formal helpers / marshals” at the events, as it is one of the biggest helps to me in coordinating. If there is a marshal at the event who can handle basic on-site issues, it means I don’t necessarily have to attend every event or stay for an entire night if I have other commitments. I am extremely grateful for that support, and it is an important factor in my willingness to take on the coordinator role.

The open comments area was interesting too. I had tried to get people to estimate attendance (scopes and guests), but the methodology was inconsistent. However, two Centres had an interesting approach.

In one case, they are limited to an overall cap by their hosting partner; in another, the demand was overwhelming the volunteers and they've had to limit attendance to guests who pre-book their spot each month. While we don't have to do that for our monthly meeting, I'm a little nervous about sending too many people to a smaller sidewalk event without adequate scope support on-site.

Question 7 – Public Observing Supports

Since some guests need more support than others, I was curious what Centres offered:

- Physically accessible site (hard surface for wheelchairs to get close to the scope, adjusted heights for different abilities): 88.89%.
- Existing bus transit near the location: 22.22%.
- Chartered bus to the location: 22.22%.
- Informal or formal carpooling, offers of rides: 11.11%.
- Dedicated “kids” zone where the scopes are set up lower: 11.11%.
- Dedicated newbie zone to help people set up: 11.11%.

In the comments, some also noted “projections to tablets” and various heights for the different scopes or helping newbies setup (although this probably wasn't the right place to include the question). Impressively, one of the Centres noted Articulating Relay Eyepieces for wheelchair guests, a wheelchair accessible port-a-potty, and handicap parking. Definitely a level to aspire to, and something we can delve into in more detail if I do the survey again next year.

Question 8 – Public Observing Themes

In some of my research prior to the survey, I noticed some of the hosts had found great success with various theme nights. As such, I wondered if any of the other Centres were doing them too (for our monthly meetings, my announcement tends to be of the form “Hey, look up, stars!” rather than a more communications-friendly theme, although our publicity coordinator has more skill in this regard for the outreach and promotion). For the other Centres, they have offered:

- Spotlight on the Moon: 41.67%.
- Spotlight on a planet: 25.00%.
- Solar viewing: 50.00%.
- Conjunction night: 0.00%.
- Messier marathon: 25.00%.
- Partnering with other non-RASC astronomy groups: 41.67%.
- Special “partners-only” night for official partners for the Centre: 0.00%.
- Partnering with a company or organization for a “special night” (Boy or Girl Scouts, a business, etc.): 50.00%.
- Rotating topics between “learning” (general) or special “observing” targets: 8.33%.
- Special outings to other regions, cities, much darker sites: 33.33%.
- Newbie nights (help them see different types of scopes): 16.67%.
- Demo nights for technology or Introduction to Astrophotography: 25.00%.
- Passport “stickers” for kids (i.e. give them a small target list to see something with different scopes or find different targets): 0.00%.
- Nothing — the stars are enough, dude!: 16.67%.

It was not surprising that the top 3 were solar viewing, partnering with a specific organization (like Scouts), and spotlight on the moon. I was surprised however that there wasn't more focus on specific planets or conjunctions. I've tried to specify a theme for each of the monthly events this year, a little “extra” promotion to hook people so they know if they've been before that tonight they'll see JUPITER or SATURN or something they haven't seen before.

In my survey of Ottawa members, there was interest in newbie nights, astrophotography nights, and demo nights too. However, as with the survey of Centres, there is still a healthy contingent to remind me — don't over-complicate things, the stars are enough.

In the open comments, the feedback was interesting, albeit anecdotal. For example, the moon focus is often the biggest event. Another also does Explore the Universe certificate promotion. Another does the A/V presentation followed by actual star-gazing to see what they've just seen a presentation about (although that worries me, as I've also seen notes online from others that this can backfire — the public sees this amazing long-exposure shot by the Hubble Telescope, and then they look through our earth-bound amateur scopes with little colour and they're disappointed).

Question 9 – Public Observing Rooms

One of the Centres was interested in knowing about those who have indoor spaces adjacent to their viewing site, if the room was free or not, and basically who was providing it. I grouped them in a single question, with the following outcomes, noting that about 60% had some sort of adjacent space:

- Free: 71.43%.
- At minimal cost: 0.00%.
- At commercial rental rate: 0.00%.
- By library: 14.29%.
- By museum: 0.00%.
- By neighbourhood association: 0.00%.
- By municipality: 14.29%.
- By science-related organization: 28.57%.
- By observatory: 42.86%.
- By NGO: 14.29%.

The bias in the results though revolve around those who use an observatory or science-based site vs. those who don't. In addition, some were answering based on whether it was solar viewing during the day when the buildings were open or at night when closed. I'm not sure it is going to help the Centre who contributed the question, so we may have to tweak it for next year.

Question 10 – Members-only Observing Frequency

I took a similar approach to the members-only event questions as I had for the public observing section above. I started off with frequency:

- Occasionally (three times a year or less OR not a set schedule in advance): 25.00%;
- Regularly (4 or more times a year AND a set schedule): 25.00%;
- Monthly for part of the year (set schedule announced in advance, even if not the whole year): 16.67%;
- Monthly all year (weather permitting of course): 33.33%;
- Annual big event: 25.00%

Again, as with an earlier question, I was expecting more clumping around a given frequency. Instead, it is spread out pretty evenly. I'm also surprised by the annual big event being "members-only". I'd only ever thought of the big festivals as open to the public, but a number of people noted it is just not feasible at their dark-sky sites. I also asked for estimates of size of groups involved, but the methodology was inconsistent, ranging from 1 to 30 people.

Question 11 — Members-Only Observing Locations

- Suburban location in a specific set location (park, field, parking lot, etc.): 7.69%.

- Viewing on the property of a permanent observatory site (but without use of the permanent telescope, just co-location): 7.69%.
- Viewing at a permanent observatory (including using the permanent scope): 69.23%.
- Dark-sky site — viewing at a dark-sky location: 46.15%.

Not surprisingly, the demands of members exceed that of the public, so the vast majority offer either better facilities at an observatory or a dark-sky site.

Question 12 — Members-Only Observing Infrastructure

As with the earlier question on public observing, I wanted to see what Centres offered members:

- Washrooms in a building: 58.33%;
- Portable washrooms already on site: 16.67%;
- Portable washrooms provided by the Centre: 25.00%;
- Dedicated parking lot: 50.00%;
- Warming room: 75.00%;
- Time limits on the event: 0.00%;
- Strict rules around use of white light (phones) or light pens: 50.00%;
- Training on how to use the permanent scope (if applicable): 75.00%

I thought there might be more variety in the answers provided when I first drafted the survey, however the use of an observatory for both members-only viewing as well as public observing tended to make the results fairly similar.

Question 13 – Members-only Observing Supports

- Physically accessible site (hard surface for wheelchairs to get close to the scope, help with setting up scopes): 71.43%;
- Already close to an existing bus route: 0.00%;
- Transit to the location 2 – chartered bus to the location: 14.29%
- Transit to the location 3 – informal or formal carpooling, offers of rides: 14.29%

The details didn't change significantly from the public option, mainly as the locations are often the same.

Question 14 – Members-only Observing Themes

This was one of the questions where I was really curious to see what was different from the theme nights for the public. The offerings are pretty dispersed across the list of topics:

- Special target nights (Moon, planet, conjunctions): 33.33%.
- Solar viewing: 33.33%.
- Messier marathon: 41.67%.
- Certificate sessions (following the observing outlines from the RASC certificates): 41.67%.
- Partnering with other Centres: 8.33%.
- Partnering with other astronomy groups: 0.00%.
- Special outings to other regions, cities, much darker sites: 25.00%.
- Demo nights for technology or Introduction to Astrophotography: 25.00%.
- Nothing — the members are self-sufficient: 25.00%.

What surprised me was that there seemed to be MORE theme nights for members than for the public. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised by that, but since I'm relatively new to the world of successful

stargazing, I've often felt members were generally more self-sufficient than I and therefore wouldn't necessarily need or likely be interested in theme outings.

Question 15 – What types of coordinators does each Centre use?

Going back to the beginning, I mentioned that there were many different configurations between members-only or public or certificate observing and how each Centre organized themselves. This question tried to unravel that a bit, again around five sub- groupings of questions:

- We leave sidewalk astronomy to individuals to organize on their own: 30.77%.
- We have a separate coordinator for sidewalk astronomy: 0.00%.
- We combine sidewalk astronomy with other viewing coordination: 23.08%.
- We have a separate coordinator for public viewing events: 38.46%.
- We have a separate coordinator for public outreach events: 46.15%.
- We have a coordinator for public outreach events that includes public viewing: 46.15%.
- We have a separate coordinator for members-only observing: 61.54%.
- We have a coordinator for observing that includes both public and members-only events: 30.77%.
- We have a separate coordinator for annual events: 23.08%.
- We have individual coordinators for special events (i.e. any willing victim): 61.54%.
- The coordinators handle all parts of the event — planning, schedule, on-site management, and publicity: 53.85%.
- The coordinators handle planning and schedule, but marshals handle on-site management: 23.08%.
- The coordinators handle planning and schedule, but a media coordinator handles publicity: 38.46%.
- We use a coalition-of-victims for each event, so the roles vary by event: 23.08%.

In the end, I don't think I asked the right formulation of the question for the sub- headings. In theory, they should add up to 100% but because they're grouped under one big question, some people just skipped some options as it didn't apply to them. There's a lot more to unpack in there, although it is as much about Centre management as it about observing. In one of the open prose comments, I was intrigued that a Centre has their observatory sessions hosted by pairs of trained members (of which there are 16) with scheduling done by quarter.

Question 16 – Last year's success?

If I was to strip away all the mechanical information above, in some ways, the survey comes down to a simple question — what was the most successful thing your Centre did last year? I made the question just an open text box, and the list was fascinating. Raw entries included (only slightly edited to hide individual Centre identification):

- Eclipse
- Observe the Moon Night; Mercury transit
- The RASC National Day to celebrate Canada's 150th
- AV Presentation followed by Stargazing, offered free of charge, not uncommon to have over 100 attendees on nights when the skies are clouded over and snowing or raining. We invite all service groups to attend as well as any scouting troops. We are also partners with a local Provincial Park, this is a camping weekend for our members. Most successful event was the Solar Eclipse Party open to the public.

- Astronomy Day at a Chapters. Showed a couple hundred people the Sun through a couple of solar scopes and handed out plenty of planispheres, moon maps, pamphlets, etc.
- We partnered with the local university for two great events. At a park by the River front for the Solar eclipse. A large multi discipline university 'science program' open house where we had a large indoor display and 4 scopes fitted for solar viewing.
- Eclipse at science centre
- Total solar eclipse event, both local and a road trip to Oregon
- Partial Solar Eclipse
- The eclipse. It attracted many more than we expected. We ran 3 sites for that. Most of the people who would normally help were at totality so it was a small crew.
- We provided RASC solar viewing shades to the county libraries, and let public know they could go to a library to safely watch eclipse. (Our members traveled to totality, so none were here to run an event themselves.
- Had a member-only event at an extremely dark sky
- Toss-up between changing our regular Friday Public observing to Sat for the Perseids and providing solar scopes etc. for the eclipse

It was no surprise the eclipse figured prominently in most answers. However, I was also intrigued by those who DIDN'T mention the eclipse, showing that not all Centres focus on the same thing, given the eclipse zone location, and yet still had very different successes.

Question 17 – Plans for this year

I book-ended the last question of looking backward to ask them what they wanted to “add” or do differently this year. Here are the raw results:

- Add members-only viewing and move location for public
- Finalize location for centre observatory; dark-sky preserve; bathroom and warming option
- I wish we could get more club-member volunteers to step up and help.
- Have a successful “Star Party” at our observing site.
- More sidewalk astronomy.
- It would be helpful if we had more members/volunteers who would set up their scopes each month and we could increase the pre-booked public numbers. I would like to know more about ‘pop-up sidewalk astronomy’. There was no place to add this but each year we partner with a dark-sky area for the Perseid Meteor Shower. They keep the park open past midnight. There were 2,000 people in attendance last year.
- anticipating access to an observatory again this summer!
- build telescope pads and a fence to block headlights
- Anniversary Banquet
- Lots of clear skies for our summer star parties!
- Have a successful international astronomy day, in years past we have had to cancel due to poor weather.
- Attend more events
- Find an urban site with free rooms to restart our Sidewalk Astronomy and offer sessions such as NOVA, NOVA Jr and Telescope Workshop

Wrapping up

After the survey was done, a friend asked me, “Did you get what you want from the survey?” and I could honestly say the answer was both “Yes! And more!” and “I don’t know yet”.

There is a LOT of data in the survey, and while I don't want to take percentage changes as too definitive given the small sample size, it is at least somewhat indicative of who is doing what as well as where and how. I may find myself returning to it throughout the year.

Between the two surveys — the one of Ottawa member and the one of RASC Centres — I see a lot of great creative ways to improve some of what we do in Ottawa. I also see things that, while creative and interesting, are more likely lower priorities to focus on for my role.

For this year's observing plans and coordination duties so far, I've tried to do a few things differently:

1. Survey the members about their desires for the monthly events.
2. Survey the other Centres to glean new ideas.
3. Expand from May to October to add April (International Astronomy Day) and November.
4. Expand the cross-promotion with sidewalk astronomy and informal groups so that it is more formally promoted and members are encouraged to join too, not just leaving it to a smaller handful of willing members.
5. Plan (but perhaps not organize directly) some members-only visits to additional sites that have some darker-sky opportunities that some members would like to try out formally as a RASC-led / RASC-approved / RASC-sanctioned event.
6. Add some themes to my announcements.

The upside is more events; the downside is more GO / NO-GO calls to be made and distributed, hoping that the result matches the weather forecast that day or from the day before. And I need to start exploring options for washrooms on-site and a potential light barrier solution at the monthly event.

Thank you

Thank you to all the Centres who participated. For those who didn't get a chance this year, hopefully I'll be able to expand a bit next year and improve the questions as well as the targeting.