

ASTRONOMY NEWSLETTER May 09
May 2009
From the Trackman Planetarium
Joliet Junior College.

We know winter is officially over now that Orion has disappeared behind the sun as we see him from earth. And, the first of the summer constellations are beginning to appear in the evening sky, with Bootes - The Herdsman - in the sky at mid-evening. Bootes looks like a kite and the bottom star in the kite is the star, Arcturus. Arcturus is an orange/red star 36 light years away. Arcturus is also a big drifter in the heavens, having moved two moon diameters in the last 2000 years. All stars are moving. The movement is called proper motion and all stars have proper motion. But few stars appear to move as quickly as Arcturus.

The easiest way to find Arcturus is to look directly overhead and find the Big Dipper. The Big Dipper is an asterism, or a part of a constellation, and the Big Dipper is part of the constellation of Ursa Major - the Big Bear. Follow the curve of the Big Dipper's handle and you will come to Arcturus.

If you come down about 45 degrees from the bowl of the Big Dipper, you will come to two fairly bright stars. The star on the right is Regulus in the constellation of Leo, and the yellow "star" to the left is the planet, Saturn. (Tip: extend your arm and spread your fingers. The extended fingers cover about 20 degrees of sky.)

Venus is a very bright object in the eastern sky before dawn. Mars is the dimmer red "star" to the east of Venus. And Jupiter is the bright object high in the southeast before dawn.

At the end of May, Vega will be appearing in the northeast sky. Vega is part of the summer triangle of stars and one of the brightest stars in the sky at 25 light years away.

The full moon is on the 8th and will block almost any hope of seeing the Eta Aquarids meteor shower on the 5th.

Not too long ago, May 1st was widely celebrated as "May Day". May Day got its start as one of the "cross-quarter" astronomical days celebrated by the Celts. A cross-quarter day is a day halfway between a solstice and an equinox, or an equinox and a solstice. May 1st is approximately half way between the first day of spring and the first day of summer. The most celebrated of the cross-quarter days is Halloween.

It wouldn't be the May Newsletter if I didn't point out that at mid-May the sun comes up at the northern-most town in America - Barrow, Alaska - and the sun won't set in Barrow until the end of July.

The International Space Station will begin going over in the evening skies on May 9th. This will be the first evening crossings since astronauts installed new solar panels on

the space station, and those reflective panels make the ISS the third brightest object in the sky after the sun and moon. There will probably be a lot of flying saucer sightings until folks are used to this bright, high-speed object crossing the sky. To find when the SSI will cross your town, go to "Heavens-above.com" and use their database to set it for your town. If you have problems, e-mail me with your town's name and I'll set Heavens-Above and send it back to you.

May 12th is "Telescope Night" at the planetarium. Actually, it will be on the Nature Path to the west of the planetarium. Since the sun doesn't set until 8:00 o'clock, we won't get in much viewing, but we will help with telescopes if you are having problems setting yours up. Hopefully, we'll get to see the sun before it sets. We are still way behind on our sunspot cycle so we'll hope for the best. Mercury is a possibility and Saturn is a given for clear sky viewing. In case of clouds, we will move indoors.

Our other shows at the planetarium during May are shows on the Solar System on the 7th and 21st at 6:30 pm and a pre-recorded show on the 26th at 7:30 pm. We have new "live" shows and they have been warmly received. The show on the 26th will be a recorded show about the creation of the universe and our solar system. All of the shows start with a "dome show" using the Spitz Star Projector

*Time for a personal note. I want to wish Dr. Michael Lee, the Science Department Chairman at Joliet Junior College, a very long, happy and healthy retirement. Little did I realize four years ago when Dr. Lee brought me on-board at Joliet Junior College, that he was giving me the world's greatest job, working with some of the greatest people, at one of the country's finest institutions. Thanks, Boss. Now, to you and your lovely wife - **go play some golf!***

And finally, we received the first inquiry of the year about Mars being bigger than the moon in August. This rumor has spread through the Internet every year since 2003 when Mars made a close approach to the earth. It didn't happen in 2003 and it won't happen this year or any other year. It's a hoax.

Art Maurer - Director

The Trackman Planetarium at Joliet Junior College

amaurer@jjc.edu