

# MAY 2008 ASTRONOMY

Trackman Planetarium at Joliet Junior College.

Happy Astronomy Day on May 10th.

May is here and the weather is more attractive to spending time viewing the night sky. Unfortunately, at mid-month, it doesn't get dark enough for astronomy until 9:15 and it isn't entirely dark until 10 o'clock.

Mars and Saturn remain the two evening planets. To find Mars, look for the two stars of Gemini above you and to the west. Mars is the red planet right below them. Saturn is to the east of Mars and it is almost directly overhead. Saturn appears as one of two bright stars that are close together. The star to the west is Regulas, and the one to the east isn't a star, but Saturn. On the evening of May 12th, the moon will be right below Saturn. As the month progresses, Mars will move eastward towards Saturn and by the first week in July, Mars and Saturn will appear next to each other. Mars, motion through the stars towards Saturn is caused by its orbiting around the sun faster than Saturn. Mars orbits the sun in 687 days while Saturn has a leisurely 29 year orbit.

The elusive planet Mercury can be seen after sunset until about 8:20 PM on the first days of May. Look slightly to the north of due west. If you have binoculars, they will help you find Mercury. Never use binoculars near the sun. Wait until after the sun has set to start your search. At the end of May, Jupiter rises at 11:15 pm. Like the stars, Jupiter rises four minutes earlier each night, so it will be in the evening sky during summer.

A sure sign of spring is the Big Dipper overhead in the evening sky. Look at the middle star in the handle and see if you can see two stars - Alcor and Mizar. The ancient Arabs used those two stars as an eye test. Look at the middle star in the handle with binoculars and you can see three stars.

May 5th is the peak of the Eta Aquarid Meteor shower which could have as many as 70 meteors per hour this year. The center of the meteor shower is in Aquarius and doesn't rise until 2:45 in the morning.

And now for some trivia: on May 14th the sun will rise at Barrow, Alaska, the northernmost city in the United States, and it won't set again until July 28th. It may sound great for golfing, but the average high temperature in July at Barrow is 46 degrees. In Fairbanks, the sun sets everyday, but it is below the horizon for only three hours each night at the Summer Solstice in June

The full moon is on May 19th. Because we are at the time of the year when the sun is high in the sky, the full moon - being opposite the sun - crosses low in the sky.

For those of you who keep track of the sun, it starts the month in Aries and on the 14th it moves into Taurus. We know that is not what your Astrological charts say, but due to an earth wobble called "precession", astrologers haven't had the right dates for hundreds of years. By mid-May, Vega, in the constellation Lyra, will be in the northeast evening sky. Vega is one of the stars in

the Summer Triangle. The other two stars are Deneb in Cygnus and Altair in Aquilla. Vega is the 5th brightest star in the sky and is 25 light years away. Look in the area of Vega with binoculars and you will see several double stars. The Ring Nebula, a ring of gas blown off by a dying star, can be seen near Vega with small telescopes. In four or five billion years, our sun will be a ring nebula.

On May 25th, NASA will land a new Martian explorer, Phoenix, on the surface of Mars. Phoenix is a radio-controlled vehicle that will survey the surface of Mars to find suitable places for landing human occupied spacecraft in the future and to look for water. Phoenix has been traveling to Mars since June 2007. Phoenix will join Opportunity and Spirit, two radio controlled rovers that have been traveling around Mars surface since January 2004. Spirit and Opportunity were scheduled to operate for 4 months but they are still operating today - though they have some "aging" problems.

May is the last month for public programs at the Trackman Planetarium. We are scheduled to replace the seats and the carpeting in the planetarium over the summer and will be back in September.

The young people shows at the planetarium this month are at 6:30 pm on May 1st (Larry, Cat on the Moon), May 15th (Solar System Stakeout) and May 29th (The Summer Sky for Kids). The only General Audience Show is at 7:30 pm on May 6th (This Month's Sky).

The show on May 20th has been cancelled so that the technicians from Spitz Planetariums can do maintenance on our planetarium projector.

We will be doing private shows for Day Camps and Scout Troops during the summer, and the Astronomy Newsletter will be sent out during the summer as well. If you are interested in scheduling a show, call Christine between 7:00 am and noon at 815-280-NOVA.

Do you have a telescope, enjoy camping, and wish you could learn more about astronomy while having fun with amateur astronomers? Have you ever wondered what it would be like to look through one of those monster telescopes you see for sale in magazines? If so, you might want to consider attending a "Star Party" this summer. There are several of them. The first one is on June 6th, 7th and 8th at the Green River Wildlife Area - about 90 miles west of Joliet. There is also a Sky Party during July in Indiana, and September near Kankakee River State Park. If you are interested, E-mail me and I'll send you the information on who to contact, prices, etc

And finally, thanks to everyone, especially Christine McKittrick, who have made this season a success.

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