

NOVEMBER 2009 ASTRONOMY
From the Trackman Planetarium at Joliet Junior College.

Jupiter is the bright object in the southern sky. It is 470 million miles away, but since it is eleven times wider than the earth, it is still very bright. The Summer Triangle of stars is still in the western sky and the Pleiades, a beautiful cluster of stars, is in the eastern sky. It is easy to spot the stars that make up the "W" of Cassiopeia high in the eastern sky. Below the "W" is the Andromeda Galaxy, but you will need binoculars to find it. Mars is coming around to the evening sky, and by the end of November it rises at 9:30 PM. The full moon is on November 2nd. Meanwhile, Saturn is up early in the morning.

The planets Neptune and Uranus are east of Jupiter when you look at Jupiter in the evening sky. You need a telescope to see Neptune and Uranus. Uranus was discovered by William Herschel, a British scientist who wanted to name the planet after the King of England. He was overruled - as is often the case - by the International Astronomical Union. So, instead of having planet "George", we have a planet with the much more sensible name, "Uranus". (The punsters of the world should be grateful!)

The Leonid meteor shower, one of the best of the meteor showers, will peak on the night of November 17th. Since there is no moon that night, viewing should be great if there are no clouds. The best time to look would be to the east before sunrise, but start looking in the evening and you should see a few in the eastern sky. The Leonids are small stones left behind by comet Swift-Tuttle.

LCROSS, the rocket we crashed into the moon on October 9th, met with limited success. The plume of debris we all watched for didn't materialize to the extent anticipated, but the shepherding instrument package that followed LCROSS into the moon's crater did sample enough of the kicked-up debris to determine the amount of water frozen in the target crater.

As the Holiday Season approaches, the "Name a Star After a Loved One" commercials will begin. They are a scam! There is only one way you can get something named after you, and that is if you discover a comet. Comets are named after their discoverers. Everything else in the sky is named by the International Astronomical Union. If you have a star named after good old Aunt Mabel, the only people who will recognize the name are you and the guy that got your \$50.00.

On October 8th, a 32 foot wide asteroid exploded at midday over Bone, Indonesia. Scientists at the University of Western Ontario estimated the explosive yield to be 50 ktons of TNT. The explosion triggered sensors at the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization over six thousand miles away. The interesting part is that we never saw it coming.

The public show season has started. Our General Audience shows this month are on November 3rd (The Seasonal Skies of November) and November 17th. (How to Buy a Telescope) at 7:30 PM. Our children's shows are at 6:30 PM on December 12th (What's in the Sky), and on Sunday, November 29th at 2:30 PM (Winter Skies for Kids). Every show starts with a tour of the sky using our Spitz star projector putting the starry sky on the planetarium's thirty-foot dome. All the shows at the Trackman Planetarium are presented at no charge as a public service of Joliet Junior College. The show on telescopes should be a "must see" if you are even thinking of purchasing a telescope as a holiday gift. Many of the telescopes you see at discount stores are nothing but expensive toys that are not suitable for astronomy.

On Saturday November 7th, from 10:00 am until 1:00 pm, Joliet Junior College will be sponsoring "Discover JJC". Stop by and tour the Main Campus, meet with faculty and learn about academic programs. Talk with current students and also learn about financial aid, scholarships and study-abroad opportunities. And, of course, stop by the planetarium for the brief program on "Tonight's Sky".

A reminder that the movie "2012" is going to be released in November. Judging from the response I received to the letter I sent in October, there seems to be many children who believe the world will end on December 21, 2012. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory has forwarded an excellent article by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific which gives even more detail about how everything in the movie "2012" is based on false science. The website is:

<http://www.astrosociety.org/2012/ab2009-32.pdf>

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