

APRIL 2009 ASTRONOMY NEWSLETTER

From the Trackman Planetarium at Joliet Junior College.

April brings warmer weather that makes sky watching a lot more appealing than winter, but it also means it doesn't get dark until about 8:15 in the evening. And now that we are past the first of spring, the farther north you go, the later the sun sets and the later viewing time begins.

We are seeing the last of Orion as the earth's orbit brings us to the point where we lose Orion in the sun. Meanwhile, the Big Dipper is now directly overhead in the evening sky. The two stars on the side of the "bowl" opposite from the handle are the pointer stars - Dubhe and Merak. The pointer stars will show you the way to Polaris, the North Star. Polaris is the tip of the handle in the Little Dipper. Polaris is almost directly above the North Pole. Polaris is not the brightest star in the sky, as is sometimes believed. Sirius, to the east of Orion, is the brightest star in the sky (Excluding the sun.)

The bright red star in the eastern sky is Arcturus. Arcturus is the first of the "summer stars". It is 34 times wider than our sun and lies 37 light years away. Tradition says that Chicago used the light from Arcturus to cut the ribbon at the Century of Progress in 1933.

Saturn is the only planet visible in the evening sky. It appears like a yellow star below the Big Dipper. On April 6th, Saturn will be right above the moon.

For those of you who are up before sunrise, Jupiter and Venus are the two bright planets in the eastern sky.

The sun starts the month in Pisces and moves into Aries on the 18th.

The full moon is on April 9th. The Native Americans had different names for the April full moon, most having to do with planting or flowering. The Sioux were the most original, calling it "The Moon when geese return in scattered formation.

The Lyrids meteor shower is on the 22nd. The best time to view the meteor storm is before sunrise in the eastern sky. The Lyrids is not one of the best meteor showers with between 10 and 20 meteors per hour.

On April 4th, Joliet Junior College will have an open house from 10:00 am until noon for prospective students and their parents. Come and see the different programs the college has to offer and get information on scholarships, costs, etc. You might be surprised at some of the programs we offer at JJC. We will be having mini-programs at the planetarium.

On March 6th, NASA launched the Kepler space telescope, a telescope dedicated to searching for planets that might sustain life and are orbiting other stars. For a planet to sustain life, it has to be at a distance from its host star that allows it to have water - not too close to have it boil away or so far out to keep it frozen. It also has to be more than

one half the mass of earth (or it will not have enough gravity to hold on to a climate), and no more than ten times the mass of the earth (or it holds on to its hydrogen and helium and becomes a gas giant).

Private sources continue to fund the S.E.T.I. (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence). S.E.T.I. uses large radio telescopes to look for radio signals from outer space. It was made famous in the movie, "Contact". Last month, a visiting school teacher told of a radio signal called the "Wow" signal that was received in 1977 on a forerunner to S.E.T.I. at Ohio State University. The "Wow" signal seems to have been a radio signal from somewhere in space. It is called the "Wow" signal because that is what the operator, Dr. Jerry Ehman, wrote on the tape when he saw the signal. Google "wow signal" to read about this unusual occurrence.

During their recent trip to the International Space Station, the crew on the Space Shuttle added additional solar panels to the Space Station thus making the Space Station one of the brightest objects in the sky as it orbits the earth every ninety minutes.

Unfortunately, the only evening passes in April are on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. To find the times the International Space Station will be visible from your backyard, go to: Heavens-Above.com. Use this database to set the website to your location and you will have a great source for everything that is in your sky on that night.

On April 25th, the Plum Creek Nature Center in Beecher will be celebrating Earth Day from 10:00 am until 4:00 pm. The Friends of the Planetarium will be doing Daytime Astronomy, which includes looking at the sun (sunspots and prominences), Venus and maybe Jupiter and Mercury. We will be sharing the agenda with other things such as "Waggin' Tails Hikes" and "Worm Chat Rooms"! Call 815-727-8700 for more details.

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