April Skies

As April begins, comet PanSTARRS is still hanging around in the western sky just after sunset. It has faded to magnitude +3. Look to the northwest about 45 minutes after sunset and at about 10 degrees above the horizon. A pair of good binoculars will be helpful in finding PanSTARRS. For more information I refer you to the chart on page 51 of the April Sky & Telescope magazine or go to skypub.com/panstarrs.

April brings the Lyrid meteor shower. This show is quite unpredictable but has been known to peak at 90 per hour. This year the best time for viewing will be in the early morning hours of April 22nd. If you wait until the bright Moon sets in the west you will have a narrow window of opportunity for about a half hour before the first glimpse of dawn. Look to the northeast toward the bright star Vega in the constellation Lyra “the Harp.”

Jupiter will dominate the early evening sky and is in a great position for viewing with binoculars or a small telescope. By months end it will have moved far enough west so that images will not be as sharp because of viewing through more of the Earth’s atmosphere.

Venus will move past superior conjunction with the Sun and be just barely visible above the west-northwest horizon on April 30th. Mars reaches its superior conjunction with the Sun on the 18th and won’t be visible to us for several months to come.

The planetary star this month will be Saturn. On the 28th is reaches opposition with the Sun and also its closest approach to Earth. Thus it will be visible all night long. As the month progresses it will brighten to magnitude +0.1 and the rings, at 18 degrees tilt, will remain a spectacular target for small to medium sized telescopes. At the beginning of the month it rises about a half hour after nightfall in the southeast and ends the month rising at sunset.

The Moon will be last quarter on the 3rd, new on the 10th, first quarter on the 18th and full on the 25th. Looking west on the 14th about an hour after sunset, the crescent Moon will be found a bit above and to the left of Jupiter. On the 20th the Moon will be just below the bright star Regulus in the constellation Leo “the Lion.”

Look to the southeast on the 24th and 25th about an hour after sunset. On the 24th the nearly full Moon will be just below the bright star Spica in Virgo. On the 25th, the full Moon rises just below and to the right of the ringed planet, Saturn. On the 26th the Moon moves a bit farther east and is to the left of Saturn.

Clear Skies!

Jon Spargo
New Mexico Tech Astronomy Club
April 2013