August Skies

Normally in August those of us who love to watch meteor showers eagerly wait for the arrival of the peak of the Perseid meteor shower on the 12th and 13th. Alas, this year we will be thwarted by a very bright full moon allowing only the very brightest of the Perseids to be visible.

August finds Saturn beginning its decent toward the western horizon. At the beginning of the month it will be seen about 25 degrees above the horizon at the onset of darkness. By the end of the month it will be only half as high. The good news is that the rings have opened to 9 degrees. For those with telescopes there are two things of interest. You should be able to see the shadow of the planet cast upon the rings. For some months now there has been a curious storm raging in the northern hemisphere. It appears as a turbulent band at a fairly high latitude. Some amateurs have photographed it. Remember that viewing it through a reflecting telescope will invert the image.

As Saturn heads west the planet Jupiter takes over the night sky. Rising around midnight, the giant planet shines at magnitude -2.5. By the end of the month it will rise as early as 10 p.m. The best viewing will be in the early morning hours when Jupiter is well above the horizon. Mars now rises around 3 a.m. but remains only at magnitude +1.4. For those of you with telescopes, Mars will be on the 6th & 7th, only one half degree from the large star cluster known as M35.

This month Venus is lost from our viewing as it reaches superior conjunction (passing behind) with the Sun on August 16th. Mercury will put in a very brief appearance during the final few day of August. Look east about 45 minutes before sunrise. On the 31st it will shine at magnitude +0.3 and rise about 1.5 hours before the Sun.

The Moon will be first quarter on the 6th, full on the 13th, last quarter on the 21st and new on the 28th. On the 3rd, looking west about one hour after sunset, the crescent Moon will be found directly below Saturn which is still in Virgo. The next night the crescent Moon will be just below the bright star Spica in Virgo.

Near midnight on the 19th, while looking east-northeast, the waning gibbous moon will be found directly above Jupiter. Near 1 a.m. on the 22nd the waning last quarter Moon will appear to be just below the Pleiades (seven sisters) star cluster and just above Taurus, “The Bull.” Finally, looking east on the 25th about 45 minutes before sunrise, the waning crescent moon will be just to the right of the red planet Mars.

Clear Skies!

Jon Spargo
New Mexico Tech Astronomy Club
August 2011