August Skies

This month we will have two special events to look forward to. The first is the well-known Perseid meteor shower. This year the peak should occur just after midnight on the night of August 11-12. This shower should produce about one or two meteors per minute. However, the rates should increase as you approach dawn until daylight begins to interfere.

As well, a waning crescent Moon will rise between 1 and 2 a.m. While not terribly bright, it will be a bit of a nuisance for die hard meteor counters. In truth, Perseids can be seen as early as mid-July and as late as mid-August. To know if a meteor is a Perseid, follow its path backwards across the sky. If that line passes between the constellations of Cassiopeia and Perseus, it is a Perseid meteor.

The second is a rare event. It is a daytime occultation of Venus by the waning crescent Moon. It will take a bit of effort to locate the Moon during daylight. Look about 50 degrees (5 fist widths) west of the Sun. It will also be best viewed through a telescope or good binoculars. Folks in the western half of the U.S. will have the best views of this event. Those of you on the east coast may be able to see the initial disappearance but that will be about it.

The fun begins shortly after 2 p.m. MDT (add or subtract hours for your time zone). The exact start time will be determined by your latitude (north or south). In the northeast you’ll see the disappearance about 4:40 p.m. However, the altitude of the Moon above the western horizon will only be about 3 degrees. Folks in the west will be able to see the whole thing starting about 2:40 p.m. but will suffer from a higher Sun angle. The occultation will last about an hour. It also might be a good idea to start a bit early so you can find the moon during bright daylight. For more information go to: skypub.com/aug2012venusoccultation.

Mars and Saturn are headed west! Mars will pass between Saturn and the bright star Spica, in Virgo, about the middle of the month. On the 21st, Saturn, Mars and Spica form a nice triangle just above the crescent Moon. Early August will be the better time to view Saturn and its rings through binoculars or a small telescope.

Early morning planet watchers will see Jupiter rise between 1 and 2 a.m. and about 2 hours earlier by the end of the month. Venus rises about 3 a.m. all month long. By the 15th the dazzling planet will appear half lit through a telescope or binoculars as it rises 46 degrees west of the sun.

Mercury puts in a brief appearance during the middle two weeks of the month. Look for it low on the eastern horizon about an hour before sunrise.

This month we will be treated to a rare Blue Moon (two full moons in one month). The Moon will be full on the 2nd, last quarter on the 9th, new on the 17th and first quarter on the 24th and full again on the 31st. On the 11th through the 13th the waning crescent Moon
will visit Jupiter first and then Venus in the early morning sky. Look to the east-northeast around 3 a.m.

Looking east about 45 minutes before sunrise on the 13th through the 15th, the waning crescent Moon will pass Venus and then approach Mercury. On the 21st, the crescent Moon will be between and just below Mars and Saturn. Look to the west-southwest about an hour after Sunset.

Clear Skies!

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