

2012 to offer partial eclipse

The coming year offers many stargazing delights, and a couple of them don't even occur at night.

There will be the usual annual meteor showers, brilliant naked-eye planets, and pairings of night sky objects, but 2012 also will treat us to a partial solar eclipse and a rare transit of Venus.

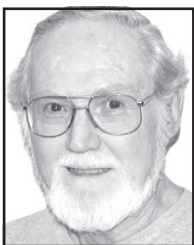
Meteor showers. Meteor showers are annual events with the same showers occurring each year, but the presence or absence of a bright Moon determines which might be worth seeing in a given year – a full moon makes them hard to see. This year the Moon favors the Lyrids in April, the popular Perseids in August, the Draconids and Orionids in October, the Leonids in November, and the Geminids and Ursids in December. While more meteors are usually seen in the mornings, this year the Perseids, Draconids, and Geminids might be entertaining throughout the night.

Naked-eye planets. Each of the planets has its own schedule for favorable viewing times and dates, and these change from year to year. Speedy Mercury, which makes four trips around the Sun each Earth-year, usually makes six two-to-three-week appearances in our night sky with half being in the morning and half in the evening. This year the morning appearances come in mid April (poorest), mid August (good), and late November-early December (best) when the elusive planet is seen low in the east for an hour or two before dawn. Evening shows will be early March (best), mid June (good), and most of October (poorest) when Mercury is seen low in the west for an hour or two soon after dusk.

Unlike the shy Mercury, Venus dominates the sky when she is up. This year the goddess of love and beauty will continue as the brilliant “evening star” through mid May. After a rare encounter with the Sun in June – see below – she then becomes the “morning star” from July through the end of the year.

Mars will be a fixture in our evening sky much of the year. Currently rising in the late evening, it reaches opposition March 3, when it rises at sunset and is up all night. It will continue its evening presence until late December. For morning stargazers, Mars will also continue to be seen in the west in the morning sky for a few more weeks.

Jupiter, currently high and bright in the south in the early evening, will stay in the evening sky through April. Then after passing behind the Sun, it emerges in the morning in June,



Paul Derrick

• Stargazer

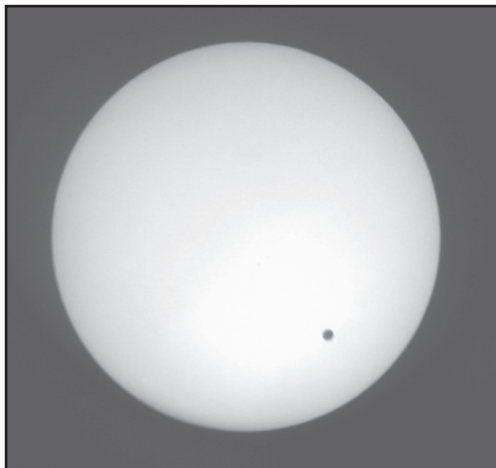
there to remain visible through late November. In October it also stars showing in the evening sky, reaches opposition Dec. 2, and then dominates the evening sky through the end of the year.

Saturn now graces the morning sky high in the south, and will be visible in the morning through March. It also begins appearing in the evening in March, reaches opposition April 15, and will be prominent in the evening sky until September. After passing behind the Sun in late October, it closes out the year back in the morning sky starting in November.

Close encounters. Every year gives us some neat encounters between stars, planets, the Moon and other objects, and 2012 seems better than most years. The encounter I'm most looking forward to is when the two brightest planets, Venus and Jupiter, pass within a few moonwidths of each other in the early evenings of mid March. If you like night-sky drama start watching now each evening as they gradually approach almost like two shy lovers, until they blaze side-by-side low in the west.

Solar eclipse. The solar eclipse occurs in the late afternoon of May 20 and those directly in the eclipse path from around Midland, Texas, northwestward through northern California will see an annular solar eclipse when the Moon passes exactly between the Sun and Earth. Ordinarily this would produce a total solar eclipse where for a few minutes the Sun would be completely hidden by the Moon. However, owing to their relative distances during this eclipse, the Moon won't appear quite large enough to hide the entire Sun but rather will cover the center, leaving a brief but dramatic “ring of fire.”

Most of those in the western half of the U.S. not in the less-than-200-mile-wide annular eclipse path will still see a nice partial eclipse low in the west shortly before sunset – and seeing a partial eclipse around sunset with the Sun near the horizon could be pretty dramatic. The further west one is, the earlier before sunset the eclipse begins, and longer it will be visible.



2004 Transit of Venus (from Wikimedia Commons)

Transit of Venus. By far, the rarest event of the year is the transit of Venus when our neighboring planet passes directly between the Sun and Earth. Unlike solar eclipses where the Moon noticeably hides part or all of the Sun for a few minutes, Venus is so far away that the transit is visible only through a telescope. Venus appears as a tiny black dot slowly moving across the face of the Sun. At least part of the nearly seven-hour transit will be visible from virtually the entire U.S., and like with the eclipse, the further west one is, the longer it will be visible. From the central U.S. we'll see about the first three hours before the Sun sets, but this should be enough to enjoy the view.

Venus transits occur only twice per century, coming in pairs eight years apart. The last one was in 2004, so try to catch this one as there won't be another in our lifetime. Most local astronomy clubs will undoubtedly have properly solar-filtered telescopes set up for public viewing so watch for announcements.

As the dates approach for these and other night sky events, keep reading this twice-monthly column for more details about when, where, and how to look for them.

Of course, I needn't have mentioned any events occurring after Dec. 21, 2012, since, according to the crackpots, the world will end then and we won't be here to see anything.

Paul Derrick is an amateur astronomer who lives in Waco, Texas. His website (www.stargazerpaul.com) contains an archive of past Stargazer columns and other basic stargazing information. Contact him at paulderickwaco@aol.com or (254) 723-6346 or write 918 N. 30th St., Waco, Texas, 76707.

On the Beat

COLBY POLICE Thursday

11:07 a.m. – Funeral block.
11:30 a.m. – Spoke to subject on phone about retrieving personal items from residence.
1:20 p.m. – Caller advised of identity theft. Report filed.
4:52 p.m. – Criminal damage to property report filed.
5:53 p.m. – Court services called needing officer for arrest and detain order.
6:17 p.m. – Caller reported a car parked in front of residence for more than a week. Spoke to reporting party; tow away notice posted.
10:49 p.m. – Caller reported vehicle driving recklessly 30 minutes earlier. Not found.

THOMAS COUNTY SHERIFF Thursday

12:28 a.m. – Booked Matthew L. Helms at 11:38 p.m. Wednesday.
12:45 a.m. – Caller reported

lots of blood at the eastbound rest area. No blood, only vomit, message sent to Highway Patrol.

7:02 a.m. – Released Matthew L. Helms.

3:22 p.m. – Report of a possible abandoned pickup at 1796 County Rd. O. Vehicle was at Motel 6; wanted owner information to buy it. No information given to reporting party.

4:41 p.m. – Katherine Lynn McKaskle arrested on warrant by Sherman County Sheriff's Office.

5:23 p.m. – Caller reported a semi with a flat tire on trailer heading eastbound in the 2200 block of U.S. 24. Spoke to driver in the 1800 block of U.S. 83.

6:23 p.m. – Booked Warren Lee Edmondson.

7:24 p.m. – Sherman County deputy dropped transient off at Fuel Depot, 1522 County Rd. 2. Sheriff provided ride to Law Enforcement Center, then deputy took subject to Free Breakfast Inn at 499 U.S. 83.

Changes said to protect kids

TOPEKA (AP) – Kansas Attorney General Derek Schmidt is pushing proposals during this year's legislative session that he says strengthen protections for child against violent crime.

Schmidt, a Republican, announced his proposals ahead of Monday's opening of the GOP-controlled Legislature's annual session.

The attorney general is asking legislators to let trial court judges issue orders barring anyone con-

victed of a crime against a child from having any contact with the child throughout the victim's lifetime.

Schmidt also wants to amend a law on unlawful sexual relations to clarify that it applies to foster parents and state contractors in a position of trust with children.

He also said he wants to strengthen laws meant to ensure lifetime electronic monitoring of some violent sexual offenders after they leave prison.

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Time short for nominating employers for Freedom Award

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, a Defense Department agency, is calling on Guard and Reserve members to nominate their supportive employers for the 2012 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award before the deadline next Mon-

day. The Freedom Award is the Defense Department's highest recognition for civilian employers supporting Guard and Reserve members. All employers – large, small and public – are eligible to receive the honor. Guard and Reserve members, or a family mem-

ber acting on their behalf, may nominate their employers at www.FreedomAward.mil.

Service members who have previously nominated their employers for the Freedom Award are encouraged to do so again. The Department of Defense recognizes

nominees, semi-finalists and finalists each year, and all employers who have not received the award in the past ten years are eligible.

The 2012 recipients will be announced in early summer and honored in Washington during a ceremony in the fall.

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