

Stars over Sisters

By Ron Thorkildson
Correspondent

Many articles written in this column have featured various constellations, describing the mythology and prominent celestial objects associated with each primary stellar grouping.

The celestial sphere is comprised of 88 of these named constellations. There are many other interesting arrangements of stars that lie within many constellations. These are called asterisms. For example, the Big Dipper is an asterism that exists inside the constellation of Ursa Major, the Great Bear.

Another noteworthy and fun asterism is found in Vulpecula, the Little Fox. On a clear, dark night, locate Albireo, the head of Cygnus the Swan, and draw an imaginary line southward to the much dimmer star Alpha Vulpeculae.

Extending that line about five more degrees should lead to the vicinity of an unresolved patch of light visible to the naked eye. So far, no big deal. But turn a pair of

binoculars on the faint glow and a small arrangement of stars is revealed that looks strikingly like a coat hanger, viewed upside down from our latitude. Six stars in a straight line denote the body of the hanger while four other stars beneath form the "hook" (see photo at right).

The Coathanger asterism is also known as Brocchi's Cluster. Dalmiro Brocchi was an American amateur astronomer who created a map of the cluster in the 1920s for calibrating photometers.

The annual Perseid Meteor Shower is expected to peak on the evening of August 11 and the early morning of August 12. This year's version comes with some potential for good news which, however, is tempered by the certainty of some bad news.

First, the good news. Meteor expert Bill Cooke, head of NASA's Meteoroid Environment Office, believes that there may be an outburst this year that could yield anywhere between 150-200 meteors per hour. The reason for this optimism stems from the fact that the gravitational

influence of Jupiter and the other giant planets has moved three streams of particles from comet Swift-Tuttle closer to the earth. If the earth does plow through this denser material, the heightened meteor rate should last about half a day.

Now, the bad news. A waxing gibbous moon will wash out the fainter shooting stars and even make the brighter ones harder to see on the evening of August 11. But the moon sets at about 1 a.m. on August 12, so it'd be best to observe from moonset to dawn of that morning.

The Perseid Meteor Shower derives its name from the fact that the meteors associated with this shower emanate from the constellation of Perseus.

When it comes to viewing the planets this month, all the action is in the evening sky. Mercury, Venus and Jupiter will stay clustered low on the western horizon throughout August and be visible about 30 minutes after sunset.

Mercury spends the first half of the month distancing itself from the sun, but



NASA IMAGE

The Coathanger asterism in the constellation of Vulpecula bears a striking resemblance to the real thing.

after August 16 the speedy orb reverses its direction and joins Jupiter as both planets fall toward the sun.

Venus, on the other hand, spends the entire month moving ever farther from the sun. Approaching each other from opposite directions, Venus and Jupiter stand just 0.1 of a degree apart on August 27.

After the trio of planets low in the west has set, look for Mars and Saturn to take center stage in the south-southwest. Brighter Mars lies to the west of Saturn early in August, but by month's end the swifter Red Planet will have shot by the slower

moving and more distant ringed sphere.

The moon is dark early in the month, then progressively waxes until August 18, when it's full. For the remainder of the month the face of our only natural satellite gradually becomes less illuminated.

To learn more about viewing the night sky, or if you already have this knowledge and wish to share it with others, join the Sisters Astronomy Club on Saturday evening, August 27 for a starwatch at Sisters Park & Recreation District. A pre-stargazing presentation begins at 8:30 p.m.

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