

Stars over Sisters

By Ron Thorkildson
Correspondent

Aside from the blinding light of a full moon, probably the greatest frustration to the June stargazer is the long wait for the sky to darken enough to begin observing the cosmic luminaries. This year the summer solstice arrives on Tuesday, June 20, at 9:24 p.m. PDT. At that time the northern portion of earth's axis of rotation will point closest to the sun than at any other time of the year. The sun will also stand at its highest point in the sky, 23.5 degrees above the celestial equator.

As it does every year, this will produce the shortest night and longest day in the northern hemisphere.

If this weren't bad enough, the situation is made worse by what most North American and European countries do in March. We go on daylight saving time, pushing back the onset of darkness by one hour. Here in the U. S. (excluding Arizona and Hawaii) this goes on from the second Sunday in March to the first Sunday in November. On June 20 the sun won't set here in Sisters until 8:54 p.m.

The period of time from sunset to when the sun is 6 degrees below the horizon is defined as Civil Twilight. The sky is still bright enough that only the moon and the brightest planets can be seen during this time. And on the summer solstice Civil Twilight doesn't end until 9:31 p.m.

But the sky doesn't really become dark until the end of Astronomical Twilight (when the sun is 18 degrees below the horizon.) That won't happen until 11:21 p.m. And that's getting a pretty late start, even for the serious observer. If, however, you don't succumb to the sandman by this time, let's take a look at some of the sights June skies have to offer.

Last month comet Johnson (C2015V2) was seen cruising southward among the evening stars of May. This first-time visitor to the inner solar system continues its journey this month, coming to within 75.4 million miles of the earth at closest approach on June 5. Currently shining at seventh magnitude, the comet is just beyond naked-eye detection. However, dark skies and a pair of binoculars should reveal the celestial traveler. It

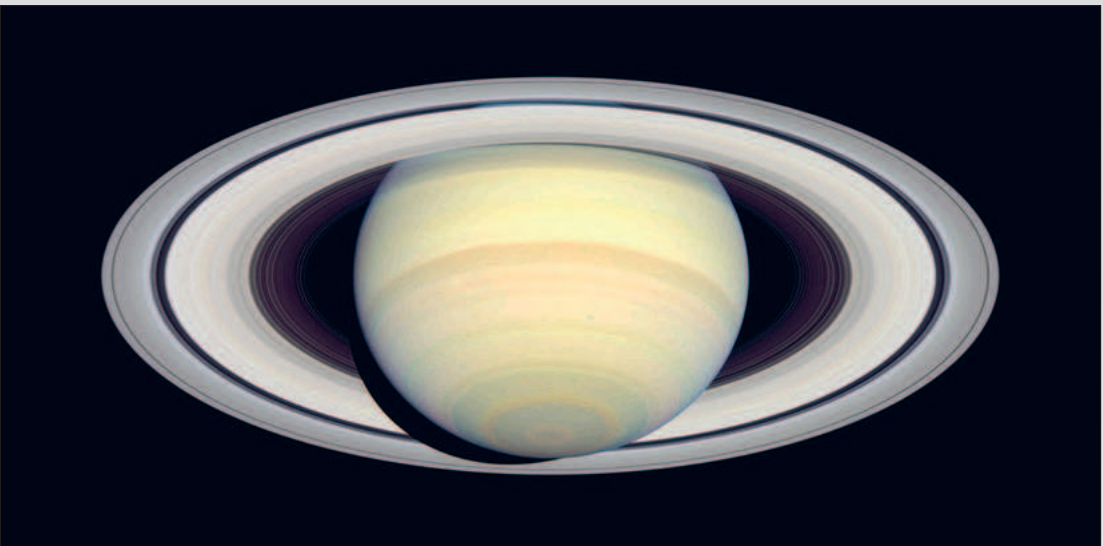


PHOTO COURTESY NASA

The planet Saturn will take center stage in June and be the showpiece object for observers through the summer.

will lie just east of the bright star Arcturus in Bootes on June 3 and 4.

The largest member of our family of planets (by far) continues to dominate the evening sky, impressing onlookers with its dazzling brilliance. Though gradually shifting westward over time, Jupiter doesn't set until about 2 a.m. by mid-month. Almost any backyard telescope will bring into view the four Galilean moons as they shift position from night to night.

The solar system's crown jewel takes center stage this month when it reaches opposition on June 15. At that time Saturn is directly opposite the sun from the earth and visible all night. The ringed orb never fails to

impress. Upon seeing Saturn for the first time through a telescope, many an observer has remarked that the stunning view almost doesn't look real, as if they were looking at a close-up model instead of a planet almost a billion miles away.

The tilt of Saturn's ring system to our line sight reaches its maximum (27 degrees) in 2017. This allows for seeing greater detail in the ring. The only down side to all of this is the fact that Saturn is currently at a place in its orbit that keeps it low in the sky. So, even when the planet is on the meridian, it appears only 23 degrees above the southern horizon. Image quality suffers when light from a distant object

passes through a thicker portion of the atmosphere on its way to an observer's eye.

Because there are two first-quarter moons in June (on June 1 and 30), the month begins and ends with a brightening moon. After the full Strawberry Moon on June 9, the lunar brightness begins to wane before going dark at new moon on June 23.

Join the Sisters Astronomy Club for a public star-watch on Saturday, July 15, beginning at 9 p.m. The event is free and takes place at the SPRD building located at 1750 McKinney Butte Rd. After a brief presentation, attendees will have an opportunity to observe through telescopes set up in the high school parking lot.

Quilt Drawing for FURRY FRIENDS FOUNDATION

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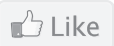
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