

from the truth. The extinction of the dinosaurs all over the world 65 million years ago is thought to have been caused by a comet-like body hitting the Earth and raising a dust cloud over the planet for four years. In the ensuing darkness, both plants and the animals that depended upon them died off. As recently as 1908, an explosion recorded in Siberia that knocked people off front porches hundreds of miles away and flattened forests over thousands of square miles was evidently caused by a very small fragment of a comet hitting the Earth. Indeed, recent theories suggest that comets strike this planet once every 33 to 64 million years, with literally earth-shaking results. Fortunately, the impact of Halley's Comet will be of a different sort.

The Most Famous of Comets

Something like "Old Faithful" in regularity as it returns every 75 to 76 years, Halley's Comet also puts on a show that few comets can rival. Thought in times past to have played a part in the overthrow of kings and empires (and even partially causing a panic in 1910 when people feared it would poison the Earth's atmosphere), maybe its greatest influence on history was to demonstrate the truth of Isaac Newton's theory of Universal Gravitation. Edmund Halley was the insightful observer who, in 1705, put together records of earlier appearances and Newton's revolutionary theory to predict the return of this comet (which was later to be named after him) in 1758. When it was first seen by a German farmer on Christmas Day of that year, Halley's prediction was confirmed, though he had passed away 16 years before. As a result, comets were shown to obey understandable laws that stretched through the universe and were made far less mysterious. This year, with satellites and eager eyes turned towards the celestial traveler, even more visions and answers to profound questions are assuredly in store.

Tips for Observing Halley's Comet

For those of us in the Northern Hemisphere, seeing Halley's Comet will take some preparation and attunement to the calendar. This is especially true at this appearance because the comet will be rela-

tively dim, being three times farther at its closest approach to the Earth than it was in 1910. Furthermore, it is going to be low on our horizon, although it will be higher and brighter in the sky the farther south on the planet you go.

For these reasons, it is important to find a place to observe that is well away from city lights and has a dark sky. A simple test to use is to see whether your chosen site is good enough to find the Milky Way. If you can spot this band of light, the comet should also show up well. Your observing area must also have a clear view of the southwest, south, and southeastern horizons. Without these, you can miss seeing the comet entirely.

Once you get to the site, let your eyes adapt to the dark for about 20 minutes. All sources of white light, such as that from cars or street lamps, should be avoided. This also holds for the light of the Moon, so time your observations for when the Moon is either a thin crescent or absent from the sky. As to visual aids, binoculars are your best bet for close observation (unless you have a telescope handy), preferably being "7x50" in power and light grasp. If they come with a clamp and tripod, so much the better.

Because the comet will be visible during our winter and early spring months, it is especially important to dress warmly with plenty of layers. Otherwise, your enthusiasm for observing can be quickly chilled in a desire to get inside and warm.

By using a good reference guide to the stars, the coming months should provide you with an opportunity to learn and marvel. May this most recent visit of Halley's Comet add an extra bit of light to your vision of the universe!

[Larry Deckman is a local writer, inventor, and attorney whose glow-in-the-dark star map is familiar to many readers of What's Happening. The text of this article comes from his latest invention, the recently produced Halley's Comet and Star Finder, published by Galaxy Glass Works. This guide to the sky includes an indestructible star-wheel which identifies the stars and constellations visible at any time of the year, along with illustrations and simple directions on using the star-wheel to find Halley's Comet throughout its 1985 and 1986 appearance. The Comet Finder will be available at the Christmas Fair at the Lane County Fairgrounds for \$10 and is currently available at other outlets around town.]

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