

August is an excellent month for stargazing

What's in the Sky

Jim White



AS I WRITE THIS IN mid-July, the big story in the night skies is Comet Neowise. By the time you read this, Neowise will likely be much dimmer than it is now. The brightness of comets can be difficult to estimate though, and it will probably be too dim to see with the naked eye in early August. At its closest (July 23), the comet was about 64 million miles from Earth. On Aug. 1, it will be about 76 million miles away. It was a great view, our first naked-eye comet in many years. Hopefully, most were able to get a view of it, or see some of the many excellent pictures taken.

August is an excellent month for stargazing, with darkness beginning to fall earlier in the evening. Sunset on Aug. 1 will be at about 8:30 p.m., and will drop to about 7:45 p.m. by the end of the month. Jupiter and Saturn still dominate in the southern sky. Even though they made their closest approach to Earth in July, in some respects they are easier to view this month, as they rise high into the night sky earlier in the evening. Both will be at their highest point

in the southern sky, and due south, at about 11 p.m. in mid-August.

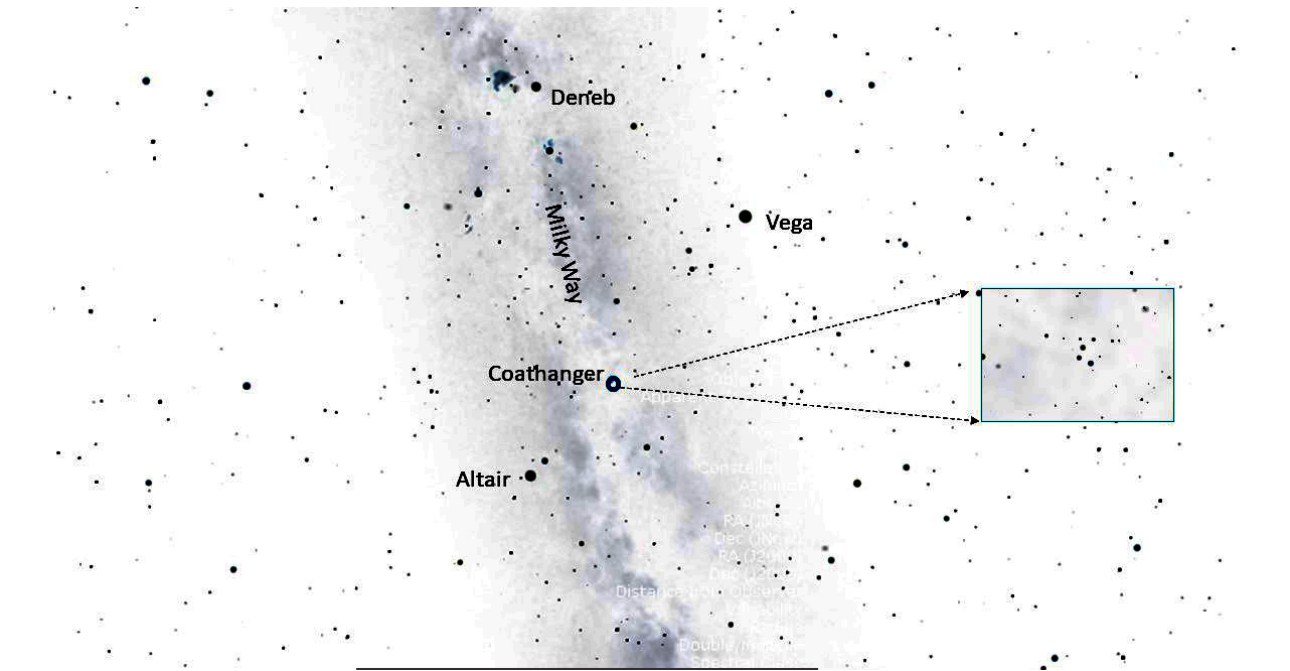
Our neighbor Mars is working its way back into the evening sky in August. Look for the red planet peeking above the eastern horizon at about 11:30 p.m. at the start of the month, and rising by 9:30 p.m. at the end of August. Mars will be best in October, when it is closest to the Earth.

Venus and Mercury are morning “stars” in August. Venus will shine bright in the east all month in the early morning hours. Look for elusive Mercury low in the northeast at sunrise, on the first few days of the month.

A favorite event to view in August is the Perseid meteor shower, which peaks in the morning hours of Aug. 11-13. If you don’t want to stay up that late (or that early), you may get a good show in the late evening hours as well. Plus, you will avoid a bit of moonlight from the third quarter Moon in the early morning sky.

We begin August with an almost full Moon, low in the south, right between Jupiter and Saturn, making it easy to pick out the two planets. Full Moon follows on Aug. 3. On the 8th, the Moon will lie just below Mars. New Moon comes on the 18th. On the 28th, the once-again nearly full Moon will be again between Jupiter and Saturn.

While you are admiring



The sky overhead, looking south in mid-August.

Contributed graphic

the Perseids, check out this month's binocular object, the “Coathanger,” in the constellation Vulpecula. To find it, first locate the bright star Vega, high overhead. Vega is the second brightest star in the night sky right now, just a hair dimmer than Arcturus, which is low in the west. Once you locate Vega, face south and look below and to the left of Vega, and find the bright star Altair. Altair will be about half-way between high overhead and the horizon. Now imagine a straight line between Vega and Altair. Point your binoculars to a

spot along this line, about half-way between the stars, but a bit closer to Altair. The Coathanger should be recognizable, although upside-down. See the picture with this article for the location, and let me know if you locate it! And a note about the picture with this article: I decided to try creating it with black stars on a white background, rather than white stars on a black background, as the skies appear. The black stars on a white background might be easier to read in the printed paper. Let me know what you think!



Zoo-reared western pond turtles released in Gorge

SUMMER'S JUST HEATING up in Portland, but for 23 western pond turtles reared at the Oregon Zoo, a nine-month stretch of warm days and nights is drawing to an end.

Since last October, the turtles basked in the warmth and light of a simulated summer in the zoo's conservation lab, growing large enough to have a fighting chance in the wild. With the help of conservation partners and local wildlife agencies, the zoo has now returned these endangered reptiles to the wild at the Columbia River Gorge.

To see video from the release, go to youtu.be/syzkvRxoJtE.

As part of the Western Pond Turtle Recovery Project, conservation scientists “head-start” newly hatched turtles gathered from wild sites, nurturing them at the zoo for up to a year. In addition to the 20 wild hatchlings brought to the lab last fall, this year's release includes three turtles that hatched at the zoo.

“Here in the conservation lab, the turtles don’t go dormant over the winter,” said senior keeper Shelly Pettit. “They experience summer year-round, and in less than a year grow to about the size of a 2- to 3-year-old wild turtle. This gives them a much greater chance of surviving to adulthood.”

Keepers prepare the turtles for life outdoors by giving them plenty of time outside to acclimate to changing

temperatures. Once the turtles reach about 50 grams (a little less than 2 ounces), they’re taken to ponds along the Columbia River Gorge, where a team of conservationists returns them to their natural habitat and monitors them for safety. In one study, scientists estimated that 95 percent of the turtles released back to sites in the Gorge survive annually.

“When the young turtles are this big, they’re able to avoid predators that threaten them, like non-native bullfrogs,” Pettit said.

The biggest threat to fragile baby turtles has been the bullfrog. Native to areas east of the Rockies, this invasive frog has thrived throughout the west, driving pond turtles and a host of other small, vulnerable aquatic species to the brink of extinction.

The western pond turtle, once common from Baja California to the Puget Sound, is listed as an endangered species in Washington and a sensitive species in Oregon. Two decades ago, western pond turtles were on the verge of completely dying out in Washington, with fewer than 100 left in the state. Since then, more than 1,500 zoo-reared turtles have been released.

The Western Pond Turtle Recovery Project is a collaborative effort by the Oregon Zoo, Woodland Park Zoo, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bonneville

Power Administration, USDA Forest Service, Friends of the Columbia Gorge and other partners.

“This collaboration has been essential in helping western pond turtles escape the mouths of invasive bullfrogs,” said Hannah Anderson, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's diversity division manager. “With low reproductive rates, and real challenges from habitat loss and disease, it is good to know partners are working alongside us to bring this once prevalent species back to the Columbia River Gorge.”

“It’s a team effort, and we’re thrilled to give these young western pond turtles a brand-new home at our Turtle Haven preserve,” said Sara Woods, land trust stewardship coordinator at Friends of the Columbia Gorge. “It’s so rewarding to see them swim off and start exploring.”

Western pond turtles are a priority species for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ SAFE program, which brings together the expertise and resources of AZA members and partners to help save species from extinction.

Donate

Committed to conservation, the Oregon Zoo is also working to save endangered California condors, Oregon silverspot butterflies and northern leopard frogs, said a



An endangered western pond turtle, head-started at the Oregon Zoo, is released to the wild in the Columbia River Gorge. There are turtle populations being monitored on both sides of the Columbia River. Michael Durham photo, courtesy of the Oregon Zoo

press release.

The Oregon Zoo Foundation is leading efforts to fund critical needs of the zoo during its reduced-capacity reopening. To contribute, go to oregonzoo.org/donate. Members, donors and corporate and foundation partners help the zoo make a difference across the region and around the world, said a press release.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Timber lands closed

Local timberland companies are announcing that due to conditions of high fire danger all lands in Klickitat, Skamania, Yakima, Hood River and Wasco counties will be closed to public entry starting Aug. 8 until further notice.

This closure includes the areas of Burdoin Mountain, Underwood Mountain, and Hood River Mountain and affects all lands owned or managed by the following parties: American Forest Management (DGS Timber, LLC), Brought Lumber Company, Hancock Forest Management (John Hancock Life Insurance and Manulife), Kreps Ranch, Kreps Family LLC, Stevenson Land Company (SDS), Western Pacific Timber, LLC, and Columbia Land Trust.

Discovery Center open weekends only

Columbia Gorge Discovery Center & Museum is open on

weekends only, Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., until further notice, according to a press release.

The museum asks that as tourism slowly reopens in the Gorge, visitors keep a six foot social distance, wear a mask and refrain from touching exhibits. Events are now being scheduled, and those with upcoming events scheduled should contact the center. The event coordinator can be reached at events@gorgediscovery.org or Executive Director Carolyn Purcell at cpurcell@gorgediscovery.org.

Quilt Exhibit opens Aug. 8 at Discovery Ctr.

Columbia Gorge Discovery Center's Hartsfield Quilt Collection opens Aug. 8 at 9 a.m. Exhibit features antique quilts made by slaves in the Deep South dating to the mid-1800s, which will be juxtaposed with modern quilts made using the same traditional patterns.

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