

'Christmas Star' to be visible during winter solstice Monday

■ Jupiter and Saturn will appear to cross paths for the first time in 800 years

By Bill Bradshaw
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — The "Christmas Star" will become apparent for the first time in nearly 800 years and — hopefully — will be visible over Baker County on Monday, Dec. 21, to coincide with the winter solstice and brighten up the darkest night of the year.

About 45 minutes after sunset Monday, Jupiter and Saturn, the two largest gas giants in the solar system, are expected to appear to cross paths in the southwestern sky. Not since 1226 have they appeared so close, although they are in reality millions of miles apart.

In 1226, Genghis Khan was taking over parts of Russia and the 5th Crusade was trying to recapture land in Egypt.

According to kgw.com, the visible distance apart of the two planets can be measured by degrees. Jupiter and Saturn will be about 0.1 degree away from each other, making them appear basically as one bright light in the sky. For perspective, the width of the full moon is about 0.5 degrees. The distance between Jupiter and Saturn from our perspective will be about 1/5 the width of a full moon.

In the Northern Hemisphere, just after sunset, look in the southwest sky and you'll be able to see the two



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It won't be quite this bright in Baker County, but a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the southwest sky on Monday, Dec. 21, 2020, will create a "Christmas Star" about 45 minutes after sunset. It's the first time the two have come together in about 800 years.

neighboring lights above the horizon. Jupiter will be on the left and Saturn will be on the right.

The sun sets in Baker City around 4:13 p.m. Monday.

According to the Bible, it was a similar event at the time Jesus was born that guided magi to Bethlehem, where the child was. Magi were a type of priest in ancient Persia. Although the Bible does not say how many magi visited Christ after his birth, it is assumed there were three because they brought three gifts: gold for

his being a king, frankincense for his being a high priest and myrrh looking ahead to his death.

According to nbcnews.com, it was a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter about 2,000 years ago, not Saturn and Jupiter.

"Keep in mind that while the two gas giants may appear close, in reality they are hundreds of millions of miles apart," NASA writes. "This will still be quite a striking sight, but you will need to look fast as both planets will set shortly after sunset."

Weather Not Promising For Viewing of Christmas Star

The proximity of Jupiter and Saturn might not be visible from Baker City Monday evening due to clouds. The National Weather Service is forecasting mostly cloudy skies, with a chance of rain showers.

COVID-19

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Restaurants will be limited to takeout and delivery, or outdoor dining, so long as Baker County remains in the extreme risk category.

To move down into the high risk category, which would allow indoor dining with a maximum of 50 people or 25% of capacity, whichever involves fewer people, the county would have to record fewer than 60 new cases during the two-week period monitored by the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), and have a test

positivity rate of less than 10% during that period.

The next such period will be Dec. 13-26.

As of Friday, Dec. 18, the county's new case total for that two-week period was at least 25, and Staten said that number could rise depending on the latest report update for Friday.

Staten said she hopes that the free COVID-19 testing event that OHA and the county conducted on Wednesday, Dec. 16, will lower the county's test positivity rate.

A total of 130 people were tested

during the event, and results should be available this weekend.

Staten said a recent testing event in Union County yielded eight positive tests out of 140 people tested. The positive rate of 5.7% is lower than Union County's overall rate over the past month, which has ranged from 8.8% to 17.9%.

Staten said Baker City's testing event also could have the benefit of identifying people who are infectious but don't have symptoms. The sooner those people know they're infected, and thus should isolate from others, the better, she said.

ELK

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"Acting like they're going to starve to death," Marvin said.

Marvin can laugh because the storms that brought a couple of feet of snow to the mountains the first half of November didn't actually imperil the elk.

Yet the animals have become so accustomed to Marvin and his crew doling out alfalfa when the snow lies deep, that sometimes they arrive before he's ready to start bucking bales.

This was one of those years, said Marvin, who's starting his third winter as manager of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) Elkhorn Wildlife Area.

The state started the project in 1971, and Marvin, who has worked for ODFW since 2005, is just the third full-time manager.

ODFW created the Elkhorn Wildlife Area to feed elk and deer each winter but the impetus is not what it might seem.

The project's purpose isn't to spare animals from starvation but rather to keep them from munching hay that cattle ranchers in the Baker, Bowen and North Powder Valleys put up each summer to feed their herds.

Because the Elkhorns lack a foothill zone where elk and deer can find sufficient natural forage during winter, the animals adapted to treat the valleys as their winter range.

But once farmers and ranchers began settling in those valleys in the second half of the 19th century, the conflict between their operations, and the hungry wild animals, was all but inevitable.

The Wildlife Area consists of



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald File Photo

Dan Marvin, photographed here in December 2018, is starting his third winter as manager of the Elkhorn Wildlife Area, a network of elk-feeding stations.

10 sites along the base of the Elkhorn Mountains, ranging from Auburn at the south end to Shaw Mountain northwest of North Powder.

Marvin said he doesn't start setting out alfalfa until after Dec. 1, regardless of early storms.

That's because the Wildlife Area's sites are open to the public, including elk hunters, until that date.

While hunting season is ongoing, Marvin said, state officials don't want to entice elk to a specific area.

"We don't want to create a baiting situation," he said.

The elk, in any case, didn't loiter long after the early November tempests.

Once more typical mid-autumn weather returned, and some of the snow melted, the elk drifted back into the mountains, Marvin said.

After the Wildlife Area closed to the public on Dec. 1,

small herds of elk showed up, but interest among the animals was "kind of hit or miss," he said.

But when wintry weather resumed the second week of December, the elk began their seasonal migration, and this time in larger numbers, to the feeding sites.

"They know where the hay sheds are at," Marvin said.

Significant numbers of elk arrived the weekend of Dec. 12-13, with close to 300 head at the Auburn site and 100 to 150 at the Anthony Creek site near the Wildlife Area headquarters, about 10 miles west of North Powder.

Those numbers are pretty typical for early winter, Marvin said.

Come January, unless the winter is abnormally mild, the Wildlife Area crew likely will be feeding about 500 elk at Auburn and 250 at Anthony Creek.

Numbers vary at the other sites, some of which also attract deer.

The Auburn and Anthony Creek sites are the two publicly accessible properties with maintained roads where people can park and watch the big herds of elk, which usually include multiple mature, branch-antlered bulls.

To get to the Auburn site, drive south of Baker City on Highway 7 for about 7 miles, and turn right on Old Auburn Lane. Follow this gravel road (maintained in winter) for about 3.5 miles where a sign marks the Wildlife Area. The elk are fed on a knoll south of the road.

To reach the Anthony Creek site, from North Powder drive west on River Lane for about 8.5 miles. The elk are fed in a meadow south of the road. You can also reach River Lane via Haines and the Anthony Lakes Highway.

VIRGINIA

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Virginia also organized the St. Elizabeth Hospital Auxiliary's annual bazaar, and she sewed Christmas stockings given to the babies born at the hospital during December.

The Baker County Chamber of Commerce honored Virginia as Legacy Woman of the Year for 2012.

Virginia's record of selfless service defines her character, Ritch said.

"She treated everyone as an equal," Ritch said. "She never, ever looked down on anyone."

Ritch said she met Virginia in 2007 while attending a fitness class at the Baker City Senior Center. Virginia, then in her early 80s, was a fitness group leader there for many years.

Ritch said she was immediately drawn to Virginia's personality.

"She had a great sense of humor, and she laughed a lot," Ritch said.

Ritch said her friendship with Virginia strengthened when Ritch became treasurer of the Baker County Historical Society, the organization Virginia had been involved with for many years.

"She had a great sense of humor, and she laughed a lot."

— Jessie Ritch, talking about her friend, Virginia Kostol, who died Dec. 13

Over time, Ritch said she learned more about the extent of Virginia's activities and talents — things Virginia herself never boasted of.

"She was a fantastic mathematician," Ritch said.

Virginia, who earned a bachelor of science degree in Home Economics and Education at the University of Washington, also received a fifth-year certificate in Education and taught at Hoquiam High School in western Washington and at Parkrose Junior High School in Portland while Carl was finishing his internship and residency.

Virginia grew up at Hoquiam and was valedictorian of her high school class, graduating in 1943.

Ritch said she learned just a few years ago that Virginia also worked as a seamstress for a local interior decorator.

"She was a beautiful seamstress," Ritch said.

Ritch said Virginia often spoke happily about the trips she and Carl took, and about their shared love of skiing and golfing.

"They were an inspiration to be around," Ritch said of the Kostols.

Colleen Brooks of Baker City, who played cards with Virginia at the golf course, said Virginia was "a great person."

"I really thought very highly of her," Brooks said.

Suzan Ellis Jones, who worked with Virginia for about 40 years on the Baker County Republican Central Committee, said one of Virginia's most notable characteristics was that she was "innately kind."

"That was Virginia's nature, she was always cheerful, smiling," Jones said.

Jones said that when she and her husband, Keith, joined the GOP in the late 1970s, both Virginia and Carl were key members of the party in Baker County.

"They were kind of our mentors," said Jones, who is the current chairman of the Baker County Republicans.

Virginia served as secretary for the central committee for many years.

"She was the glue that held the committee together for a long, long time," Jones said.

Jones said she and her husband had a relationship with both Kostols that extended beyond their mutual involvement in Republican politics.

Jones said the Kostols were supportive when Keith's father, Gilbert, died in 2011, and when Jones' mother, Bebe Racey, passed away in 2017. Gilbert attended school with Carl's father, Lars.

"They've just always been there," Jones said of the Kostols. "This is so sad. I wasn't expecting this."

Jones said Virginia not only relished being involved in many activities, but she was a "stickler for the rules" and always completely competent.

"She was going to get the job done, and if Virginia was involved it would be done right," Jones said.

Jones said she and Keith tried to visit Virginia occasionally at her Baker City home after Carl died in 2018. But the pandemic got in the way this past year.

"I regret that," Jones said.

She'll also miss delivering the annual bounty of huckleberry jelly, a longtime tradition.

"They loved huckleberry jelly," Jones said of the Kostols. "I always gave them jelly at Christmas. I guess I won't be doing that this year."

Roger LeMaster will also miss his frequent visits with Virginia.

LeMaster and his wife, Diane, have lived next door to the Kostol home for 18 years.

"She was a great neighbor, her and Carl both," Roger LeMaster said.

He said the Kostols were friends as well as neighbors. LeMaster said he usually would visit with the couple on Thursday afternoons — a tradition he continued with Virginia after Carl died.

LeMaster said he spent about an hour talking with Virginia on Thursday, Dec. 10.

He said he tried to check in on Virginia frequently to make sure she was doing fine, and to share a laugh with her.

"We always had a good laugh," LeMaster said. "That's Virginia."

Ritch said the weekend card games with Virginia and other friends were a highlight for more than a decade.

Virginia's age simply wasn't a factor, Ritch said.

She continued to drive herself around town, Ritch said.

LeMaster said Virginia's house and yard were always "immaculate."

And her card-playing skills, Ritch said, never diminished, even on the final day of her life.

"She never missed a trick on Sunday," Ritch said.

Ritch said it seems to her perfectly appropriate that in Virginia's last hours she was the same energetic companion, the same special friend, she had always been.

"She just lived a beautiful life."