

Meteor shower mania

THE SKYS
THE LIMIT



NEEL ROBERTS

Is there anything more awesome than a live celestial show? If you've ever witnessed a total solar eclipse, like the one last month (July 21st) across China, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

However, events like that are indeed a rare find, as the last one in our vicinity was in 1972 and the next won't be around until August, 2017, so 45 years may as well be as long as the 76 year wait for Halley's comet.

Yet as spectacular as these are, maybe we can settle for something less dramatic, but more regular. Meteor showers are an excellent compromise which happen several times a year and the two prominent ones are the summer (mid August) Perseid's and fall (mid November) Leonid's cascades.

"Shooting or Falling Stars" are common names that people have used for many hundreds of years to describe instantaneous, bright streaks of light that indiscriminately cross the night sky. Caused by small bits of interplanetary rock and

debris called meteoroids, they collide and smoulder high in Earth's upper atmosphere.

Traveling at thousands of miles an hour, football size boulders quickly ignite in the searing friction of the atmosphere, 30 to 80 miles above the ground.

Almost all are destroyed in this process but the rare few that survive and hit the ground are known as meteorites. When a meteor appears, it seems to "shoot" quickly across the sky while its small size and intense brightness might make you think it is a star. If you're lucky enough to spot a meteorite (a meteor that makes it all the way to the ground), and see where it hits, it's easy to think you just saw a star "fall" — thus the name is born!

As a matter of fact this year there are at least seven known meteor showers starting right after New Year's day with the Quadrantids (January 3) and running until before Christmas (December 13-14) with the Geminids. However, aside from bad weather days, many of them are either too faint or the phase of the moon is too bright to get a decent view. For more details check out <http://skytour.homestead.com/met2009.html>!

Sky watch for the next month:

Jupiter will be blazing

across our skies through most of the night. In mid month, Jupiter rises as the sun sets and is visible in the dark hours.

Look to the southeast as your sky dims and you might be surprised at the brilliant light rising above the horizon.

Even from the middle of a city, a clear view to the southeast will reveal the king of planets ruling the southern skies.

Due to its luminosity, many who live in or close to urban areas quickly mistaken it for an airplane approaching or leaving an airport.

Is Saturn losing its jewels? Nope!

If you are checking out the famous ringed planet between Aug. 10 to Sept. 4, don't panic, your scopes okay.

You are actually witnessing a rare 14.5 year event called a "ring plane crossing" where as the rings of Saturn switch planes, appearing flat and not detectable for a short time. For more information check out <http://www2.jpl.nasa.gov/saturn/faq.html>. Galileo actually stopped studying Saturn for a while but intuitively predicted that they'd somehow come back (and he was right)!

Check out the Milky Way — this is an excellent month to get a good view of our home galaxy on a clear night but in Alberta after 11 pm, it's still warm enough to enjoy taking it in for hours.

The Perseids Meteor Shower will occur Aug. 12, and the peak will be during the early morning or late evening hours, although you can catch an early preview the night before with a mild encore the day after.

Also, check out www.whatsuptonight.net, www.astronomy.com, www.space.com and www.nasa.gov. They have much more detailed information and great stuff for kids all for free.

Public Events for the next month:

Take part in Saturday Saturn Day. Have you ever wondered what Saturn looks like during the day?

Come out to the Trek Centre on a Saturday to be announced the week before this month between 1-3 p.m. and see for yourself. You think it's awesome at night?

Just wait until you see it at high noon!

Happy Long Days of summer and keep reaching for the Sky!

Neel Roberts is a member of the Calgary chapter of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada — the nation's leading astronomy club founded in 1849 with more than 4,000 members and 29 centres across Canada. Neel can be reached at (403) 485-2683, Neel_Roberts@ptccanada.com. The members meet once a month in various places in southern Alberta and you can check them out at www.calgary.rasc.ca/