

GREAT NORTHERN SKIES

Last summer, one of our weekend guests was an astronomy buff. We wasted no time in finding a few pairs of binoculars, and sharing them around on the dock. He pointed out some of the star-clusters and distance galaxies we were able to see that clear night. As it grew darker, and the stars grew brighter, we noticed a slender film of light grow up from the horizon. In great excitement, our guest exclaimed that the Northern Lights were about to put on a fantastic show. Sure enough, after thirty minutes, the marvelous white beams that stretched up to cover nearly half of the sky began to shift and change into a swirling coloured mass that had our whole group cheering. As it turned from white to mint green to red at the tips, I ran to get my camera. We could clearly see the dome-shape of our atmosphere as the colours cascaded onto it like paint poured onto a glass ball.

No matter how much I educate myself on the science of the known universe, I still stand in awe as I stare at the night sky. For me, as for many, it is a place for deep contemplation. I visualize myself on our earth, spinning on its axis while hurdling through space, giving us new views out at our cosmos. I find it easy to conserve electricity in the summer, simply because I dare not hinder my sky watching with bright lights. Even tall clouds drifting past during a full moon at night can be a spectacular sight to watch. The full moon dates for this summer and fall are 14 June, 13 July, 12 August, 10 September, and 10 October.

Summer 2003 will bring hosts of meteors, including the showy Perseid shower (associated with the Swift-Tuttle comet) in mid-August. This pre-dawn shower should boast approximately 75 falling stars an hour.

The biggest event of summer 2003 will be Mars, our neighbour planet. It will appear larger to the naked eye than it has been seen in thousands of years, coming within 34.6 million miles of earth! Look for a distinctive rust coloured object. It will dominate the southern sky just above the horizon, as it rockets a million miles closer a day, starting in May, until reaching its closest point to earth on August 27th. By then, its brightness will have increased to a stunning 70 fold. I'll be grabbing the binoculars again, and I urge all of you to join in. Grab a telescope, fix a drink, turn off the lights, and head down to the dock to enjoy the great northern skies. It is likely that the first star you see won't be a star at all, but golden Mars!

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(Photo by Peter Buwalda, 2002)