

Skywatch

Planets align for Jupiter effect

By Raymond Bullock
special writer

The author is coordinator of the planetarium and observatory at Cranbrook Institute of Science.

This month, all five naked-eye planets will be visible at the same time. Actually, all eight planets are in the morning sky. But optical aid is needed to see the outer three.

As we approach the month of March we get closer to the infamous Great Planetary Alignment. This alignment, also called the "Jupiter effect," is supposedly going to be responsible for producing a major earthquake in California.

Most people find this idea very far-fetched. While rare by human standards, alignments such as this have occurred before. If Pluto is excluded (because of its slow orbital speed), alignments occur approximately every 179 years.

In addition, the planets are not all "lined up in a row" as some would have us believe. They are spread out over more than one-quarter of the sky in

February and March, something which will be very evident to anyone who takes the time to observe the morning sky.

On Feb. 1, Mercury was at inferior conjunction. That is, Mercury is between earth and sun and not visible. It will be coming around the sun to appear in our morning sky. Also on Feb. 1, the moon was at first-quarter phase in the evening and will be full on Feb. 8.

The moon will help us identify the planets if we follow it across the sky. It will be two degrees north of red Mars on the morning of Feb. 12. The yellowish "star" to the east (left) of Mars is Saturn. Mars will double in brightness this month as earth—draws closer to Mars. Below Saturn is the star Spica, in Virgo. The motions of Mars and Saturn will be evident if you keep track of their positions, with respect to Spica, over the next several months.

Look for bright Jupiter, east of Mars and Saturn, four degrees south of the moon on the morning of the 14th. Last quarter moon is on the 15th.

The planet Uranus will be four degrees south of the moon Feb. 1 at about 5 a.m. Uranus, orbiting farther from the sun than Saturn, is very faint and not generally visible to the naked eye.

On Feb. 20, brilliant Venus will be seven degrees north of the waning crescent moon before sunrise. The next morning Mercury will be two degrees north of the moon. Binoculars will help in finding Mercury.

Two days later, the 23rd, the moon is new and not visible.

Venus will reach its maximum brightness for the year on Feb. 25. The brilliant "morning star" is very easy to identify, and if observed through binoculars in morning twilight, its crescent phase may be seen. Unlike other astronomical objects, Venus is best observed in twilight, so there is less contrast between a dark sky and a dazzling bright

object. Also on the morning of the 25th, Saturn will be five degrees north of blue-white Spica in the southwest.

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The best chance to find Mercury will be on Feb. 26 when it reaches maximum western elongation of 27 degrees from the sun. That means Mercury will be found 27 degrees to the left of the sun in morning twilight. As usual, binoculars help in finding it.

Does the appearance of eight planets in the morning sky have any significance or pose any danger to us on earth? Cranbrook Institute of Science February planetarium demonstrations, entitled "Planets of Doom" will answer questions about the "Jupiter effect" and will show where in the sky the planets will be. For program information, call 645-3200.

Scouts take orders for frozen pizza

Boy Scouts from Troop 179 will be selling frozen pizza to offset rising Scouting expenses.

They are knocking on doors now offering frozen cheese and pepperoni pizza. All orders to be delivered to the purchasers' homes on Saturday, Feb. 13.

"By ordering large quantities the troop is able to obtain a substantial dis-

count and still pass on a good savings and derive a profit," said Joseph Hovanec, speaking for the group. The sale is the principal fund-raiser for the troop this year.

The troop is sponsored by Central Church of Christ. Its scoutmaster is Dr. John Richardson.

Telephone orders will be taken by Richardson, at 476-4320, or Tom Krup-

Class set for history buffs

History buffs will look at the "History of Farmington through Architecture" when historian Ruth Moehlman opens her four-session class at Farmington Community Center. The sessions will run from 7:30-8:30 p.m. Thursdays, beginning Feb. 4.

Moehlman, author of "Heritage Homes of Farmington," will present material on numerous

homes and buildings. center, 24705 Farmington Registration is at the Road. Fee is \$16.

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