

Leap year

Putting up with 1 more day of winter.

Skywatching? In Michigan, in February? Isn't that like a bird watcher looking for passenger pigeons? Perhaps it's not quite that hopeless, but the inordinate amount of cloudy weather we have had this season certainly has made looking at the sky extremely difficult.

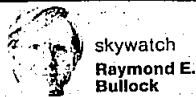
If the weather permits, skywatchers will see some extremely close conjunctions (groupings) in the morning sky between Venus, Saturn and Mars. Uranus and Neptune are also involved, but both are very faint and are not going to be visible.

February is the shortest month of the year. It usually contains only 28 days, but this year there are 29. Why the variation? The reason can be blamed on politics in Roman times.

The ancient Roman calendar originally began with the month of March and ended with February. It was an imperfect calendar and, over the course of many centuries, was no longer in synchronization with the seasons. Calendar reform was badly needed.

THE CALENDAR would have been much easier to deal with if our year (the time it takes the earth to complete one orbit around the sun) were exactly 360 days long. There could be 12 months, each having 30 days. Unfortunately the earth takes 365.26 days to complete its orbit and those extra 5.26 days complicated matters.

It was Julius Caesar who brought the calendar back into step with the seasons, decreeing that the months would alternate in length, having either 31 or 30 days. March, the traditional first month of the year, was given 31 days. April followed with 30 days, May had 31 and so on. By the time February, the last month of the year, rolled around there needed to be only 29 days to add up to a total of 365. February would have its full 30 days only once every 4 years to



skywatch
Raymond E. Bullock

allow for leap year.

Being very pleased with the results, Julius Caesar named one of the months "July" to honor himself. His successor was his nephew Augustus, who felt that he was entitled to have a month named for him as well, hence the month August. But because August followed a month of 31 days, it had only 30 days of its own. Feeling he was every bit as good as Julius Augustus decided that his month should have just as many days as July, so he took one day from February and added it to August. That left February with only 28 days, or 29 on leap years.

In 1992 February gets its full complement of days, and we have to put up with an extra day of winter! The good news is: the amount of sunlight we receive increases by one hour and 14 minutes this month.

Sunrise on Feb. 1 was at 7:47 a.m. The sun sets at 5:50 p.m. This allows for a possible (and, unless the weather conditions improve, unlikely) 10 hours and three minutes of sunshine. On the 29th, these times are 7:09 a.m. and 6:26 p.m., for a possible 11 hours and 17 minutes of sun.

The month gets off to a great start. The moon is located between the earth and the sun and is not visible. Watch for the "smiling" moon to reappear in the evening sky on the 4th.

THE MOON'S WAXING (growing) crescent makes it look like a smile rising perpendicular to the horizon. A very compact conjunction oc-

curs one hour before sunrise on the morning of the 7th. Bright Venus is one degree above Uranus, Neptune is 1.4 degree below and to the left of Venus, and Mars is six degrees below and to the left of Venus. On the next morning, Venus is 0.3 degree from Neptune and 1.8 degree to the left of Uranus, and Mars is five degrees from Venus. Of the four planets, Venus and Mars will be the only two you'll see.

The moon is at first quarter phase at 11:15 a.m. on the 11th. It has completed the first-quarter of its orbit around the earth. It is approaching the Pleiades (PLEE a dees) star cluster on the evening of the 11th. On the next evening the moon has passed the Pleiades ("shoulder" of Betelgeuse) and is seven degrees above Aldebaran (al DEE a ran), the bull's "eye."

Mercury is at superior conjunction on the morning of the 12th. It is located behind the sun, as seen from the earth, and is not visible. The best evening appearance of Mercury occurs in the springtime, and the planet will make an early showing at the end of this month.

On Friday, the 14th, the moon is in the constellation of Gemini, near the "foot" of Castor. Watch for the "smiling" moon to reappear in the evening sky on the 14th.

Raymond Bullock is the former coordinator of the planetarium and observatory of the Cranbrook Institute of Science in Bloomfield Hills. He currently works for a Troy firm which specializes in laser displays and effects.

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