Eclipse fans abandoned vigil after climax passed

SKY WATCH

RAYMOND E. BULLOCK

At precisely 1:16 p.m. on May 20, the collective voice of the crowd that had gathered to witness the annular eclipse of the sun dropped to a whisper. It was an appropriate contrast to the excitement that had been building up to the moment of annularity; the drop in voices coincided with a drop in temperature. The sudden quiet enhanced the weird cast that the sky had taken as more than 90 percent of the sun was covered. It wasn't as dark as some expected; Venus and Mercury were not visible to the naked eye, but the surroundings definitely looked different in the subdued sunlight.

Some people applauded; others, who had been holding their breath, exhaled with oohs and ahs. A very fast five minutes later it was all over and, surprisingly, a lot of observers immediately lost interest. Granted, the invisible moon was no longer illuminated by a ring of sunlight, but the sun was still undergoing partial eclipse, and it was a far better partial eclipse than observers in our area had been able to see in quite a long time! Had this been just a partial eclipse, observers would have been ecstatic at the sight but, now that annularity was over, many turned their backs and got on with life.

The weather for the eclipse was nearly perfect; a stray cloud blocked a portion of the sun at times, but for the most part viewing was superb. Alas, many people in the United States and Canada did NOT believe the warnings about looking directly at the sun and observed the eclipse with the naked eye. A number of people in Quebec (and, no doubt, elsewhere) now have permanently impaired vision. One teenage girl was quoted as saying, 'I didn't believe the warnings.' An ophthalmologist is trying to restore some of her vision.

The sun, the nearest star to us, is a mixed blessing. Without it, life on this planet would not be possible; however, without the earth's ozone layer, that same life-giving sun would eradicate nature.

Even the ozone layer doesn't provide complete protection, and that's why it is a wise decision to wear sunscreen when outdoors. That goes without saying in July and August, but few people realize that the sun's rays in June ARE AS POTENT as those in July. The sun's altitude on June 1 will be 70 degrees, and that's exactly what it is on July 10.

The difference is that in June the sun will be getting higher as the start of summer approaches, while in July it will be getting lower. Why is it so much hotter in July than in June? Because there is a lag while the planet absorbs the solar energy and heats up. Believe it or not, the sun's altitude in August closely matches that in April, but what a difference in temperature!

Besides welcoming the arrival of summer in June, skywatchers will be treated to the most excellent evening appearance of Mercury in 1994 and the year's 'lowest' full moon.

Last quarter moon will occur at two minutes after midnight on the first day of the month. If you look toward the southeast, about 45 minutes before sunrise, you will see a bright star below and to the right of the moon. This will be the planet Saturn. Saturn's beautiful ring system can be seen with a small telescope. Right now the rings will appear to be very thin as they will be tipped only five degrees.

Facing west after sunset on June 3, skywatchers will have no difficult spotting Venus. It will look like a very bright star. Directly above Venus will be the star Pollux in Gemini; to the right of Pollux will be Castor. Fast-moving Venus will form a straight line with the two stars and the moon in just nine days.

If we imagine that Venus marks the center of a large clock, then Pollux will be at 12 o'clock, and Castor will be at 1 o'clock. Down at 5 o'clock will be another planet, but nowhere near as bright as Venus.

The planet will be Mercury, making its finest appearance in the evening sky. Binoculars will help you locate star-like Mercury. Once you have spotted it and know its general location, you should be able to see it without using binoculars. But it won't be visible for long. By mid-month this fastest moving of the planets will be too close to the horizon to be seen.

The bright star below and to the left of the moon on the morning of the 5th will be the orange-red planet, Mars. On the following morning the moon will have passed Mars and will be located to the left of that planet.

New moon will be at 4:26 a.m. on June 9. The moon will be located between the earth and the sun and will not be visible.

Watch Venus shift its position, with respect to Castor and Pollux, from June 10 through 12. On the evening of the 10th, Venus will be about five degrees (10 full moon diameters) to the left of Pollux. Venus will be slightly below a line drawn from Castor through Pollux.

On the following evening Venus will be slightly higher, a little closer to the line. Notice the moon, directly below Venus.

Raymond E. Bullock, formerly associated with Cranbrook Institute of Science, now is affiliated with a local company dealing with lasers.

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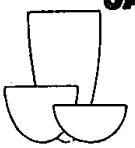

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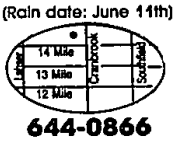

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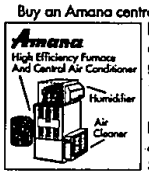

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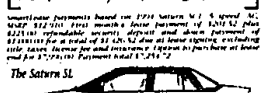

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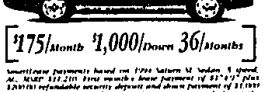

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