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Sky watch

April is month for sky spectaculars

By KENNETH WILSON, Cranford Institute of Science Observatory Reporter

April is the first full month of spring, and although its fabled showers often cloud the sky, the nights that are clear will offer the backyard stargazer the first comfortable nights of the year. On these warm, clear evenings, two fascinating phenomena will occur in April: the first major meteor shower since January and the fact that Mars will "ocult" the star Spica Capricornum.

An occultation occurs whenever an astronomical object passes in front of another. It is a relatively rare event for Mars to occult a star as bright as Spica Capricornum, but despite its lack of brightness, Mars will do just that at 8:31 p.m. April 7.

THE SHOWER of so-called "shooting" or "falling stars" (actually they're small bits of celestial rock burning up in the earth's atmosphere) will climax on the evening of April 21. It's best to watch for meteors after midnight.

As for constellations, April's are a generous mixture of both winter and spring groups. In the western evening sky are the constellations that dominated in the winter months: Orion (the hunter), can still be seen along with Taurus (the bull), Perseus (the prince), Auriga (the charioteer), Gemini (the twins), Canis Major (the big dog), and Canis Minor (the big dog).

In the eastern sky, a new selection of spring constellations appear. Almost directly overhead in the twilight group of evening stars looms the Big Dipper. Actually, this group of stars is not an official constellation but merely a part of a much larger group called Ursa Major (the big bear).

MOST OF US are familiar with the trick of finding the famous North Star by extending an imaginary line through the two front stars of the Big Dipper. This line can point in two directions.

Following it away from the bottom of the bowl of the dipper leads to the North Star, but extending it in the other direction will point to the constellation of Leo (the lion). Leo's head consists of several stars in the shape of a backward question mark and his tail and hindquarters consist of three stars in the shape of a right triangle.

Behind the handle of the Big Dipper is the constellation of Bootes (the herdsman) who is shaped like a pointed ice cream cone with one scoop of ice cream on top.

The very bright star at the point of the ice cream cone is called Arcturus. It is the fourth brightest star in the sky as seen from earth. Southeast of Leo and southwest of Bootes lies the constellation of Virgo (the virgin) which contains the bright star Spica.

APRIL IS the last month for a while that we will have an opportunity to view all five of the planets that were known to the ancient astronomers. In early April, the giant planet Jupiter will appear as a bright, star-like object low in the western sky just after sunset. But, by the end of April, Jupiter will be too close to the sun to be seen.

Unlike Jupiter, Saturn will be well placed for observing in the constellation of Cancer (the crab) during all of April. The planet Venus should be quite prominent in the morning sky just before sunrise. By the end of the month the elusive planet Mercury will be found in the eastern sky again just before sunrise. The planet Mars won't be quite as bright this month as last but it shouldn't be too hard to find in the constellation Gemini.



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