

February's too short for all of moon's phases



RAYMOND E. BULLOCK

SKY WATCH
This is the month in which the pivotal question is asked: "Will the groundhog see his shadow?" Not if he lives in Michigan! If he lived in a place where the sun was visible more often, like Seattle, it might be another story.

The folklore surrounding the groundhog is not limited to North America. In parts of Europe it's a bear or a badger that is the authority; in some areas of northern Europe, where Feb. 2 is Candlemas Day, this day marks the beginning of spring planting. No matter, the good news is February is the shortest month of the year, and we can thank politics in Roman times for that.

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 the year was 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 complicate matters.

It was Julius Caesar who brought the calendar back into step with the seasons. He decreed 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 365. February would have its full 30 days only once every four years to allow for leap years.

Being very pleased with the results, Julius Caesar modestly 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 August.

But because August followed a month of 31 days, it had only 30 days of its own. That was completely unacceptable! Augustus decided that his month should have just as many days as his uncle's, so he took one day from February and added it to August.

That left February with only 28 days (29 on leap years). At least that gets us one day closer to spring! We, in the northern hemisphere, should be grateful this short month falls in winter and not in summer. The people south of the equator have reason to cry; they are not so fortunate!

Because February is so short, the moon will go through only three of its four phases. There was

a first quarter moon shortly before the start of the month (on Jan. 30), and there will be another immediately after (on the first day of March), but there will be no first quarter phase in February! (Had this been a leap-year, the first quarter moon on March 1 would have ended up on Feb. 29.)

Although we won't see one of its phases, the moon will make a full circuit of the sky this month. On the evening of the 4th the moon,

Mars and Castor form a large equilateral triangle.

That brilliant "star" in the west southwest after sunset on the 5th will be Venus. Thirty-six degrees below Venus, a mere two degrees above the horizon, is Mercury. Mercury will be very well placed for observing later this month.

Full Moon will be at 6:55 p.m. on Feb. 6. Native American Indians gave various names to the

February full moon, such as Snow Moon, Wolf Moon and Hunger Moon. For people living off the land, the name Hunger Moon is especially appropriate.

The bright star to the lower left of the Hunger Moon is Regulus (REG you lue), the "heart" of Leo the lion. If you could see the Greek mythological pictures in the sky, you would find the Hunger Moon uncomfortably close to the mouth of the lion.

Worry not, the moon escapes being devoured; on the following night it will be found six degrees below Regulus (hopefully). The constellation following Leo across the sky is Virgo, and that's where the moon will be found after 11 p.m. on the 9th. Nine degrees to the left of the moon, looking like a bright star in the east southeast, is Jupiter. Notice how far the moon travels in only one day; on the evening of the 10th the moon

will be nine degrees below Jupiter. The bright star three degrees to the left of the moon actually is a star; it's Spica (SPY ka), the brightest star in Virgo.

Raymond Bullock is former coordinator of the planetarium and observatory of the Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bloomfield Hills. He now works for a Troy-based firm specializing in laser displays and effects.

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Wine tasting aids center for mediation

Hearts and Handshakes, an evening of wine tasting to benefit The Settlement Center, takes place from 6:30-9 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 11, at St. George's Cultural Center, 1515 Woodward, Bloomfield Hills.

Lending the handshakes as guest hosts for this pre-Valentine celebration will be Bob Allison, Henry Baskin and Colleen Burcar. Ed and Juliette Jorna of Merchant of Vino will again provide more than 100 wines for testing, and cuisine from Juliette's kitchen.

The third annual event is sponsored by the Oakland County Bar Association Public Service Projects Committee headed by attorney Joseph Hemming. Committee members have assembled a silent auction, which highlights sporting event tickets, use of several 1993 cars, dinner and theater tickets and a trip to London.

Under the leadership of the Oakland County Bar Association, The Settlement Center was established in 1989. With the guidance of the Michigan Supreme Court, the center provides mediation services to all residents of Oakland County.

"Mediation is an opportunity to bring members of the community, who are at odds with one another, into improved relations," Heimington said. Tickets are \$40 per person or \$75 per couple. For further information call 338-2100.

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