

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

These wonderfully warmish, clear, October evenings have provided some excellent opportunities for some autumnal stargazing, and the earlier sunsets have given us earlier hours in the evening to do it.

With the sun setting between 6 and 6:30 p.m. we don't have to wait so long into the evening for good, dark skies.

In the east Pegasus and Perseus are well up in the eastern sky for our observing pleasure and now the largest planet of them all, bright Jupiter has joined the evening sky.

Tonight (Wednesday) a just-past full moon joins Jupiter in the east. The glare of the moon won't be able to overcome the brightness of Jupiter. A pair of binoculars, or even a small telescope, will show the four Galilean moons spread out on both sides of the planet.

Tomorrow night the moon will be on the other side of and closer to Jupiter. Telescopes are now showing that the missing southern equatorial belt of Jupiter is returning. For some as yet unknown reason the belt went missing last year. Astronomers theorize that perhaps a layer of icy crystals formed in the upper Jovian atmosphere to hide the belt.

Just remember, that some telescopes invert the image making the southern belt the one on top.

Keep watching the moon as the week progresses because on Oct. 14, at about 10 p.m. MT the moon will move near the Pleiades star cluster, and the next evening about an hour later it will be near Aldebaran, the brightest star in Taurus, the Bull.

Be sure to examine the area around Aldebaran because that is the location of the Hyades star cluster, a very nice sight in binoculars. Aldebaran is not a member of the cluster, it just happens to lay along the same line of sight. The cluster is about twice as far as the star is from us.

Just to the left will be the bright star Capella in the constellation Auriga, the Charioteer. Auriga is an oval shape, imagine a charioteer's head with a helmet on it and Capella is the eye.

If you are an early riser, at about 4 a.m. MT on Friday, Oct. 21, look in the east for a slender crescent moon paying a visit to Mars, and on Saturday the moon moves on to visit Regulus, the brightest star in Leo, the Lion.

One more note, on Monday, Oct. 17, just after midnight a fading moon will rise in the east with our old friend, Orion, the Hunter, the king of the winter constellations. We really can see the seasons pass by watching the stars.

SKY WATCH: The moon was full yesterday, Tuesday, Oct. 11. As the days pass and if you have been watching the Summer Triangle of Vega, Deneb, and Altair you may have noticed that Deneb, the tail star in Cygnus the Swan, is now the highest of the three stars replacing Vega which had held that position for most of the summer. Looking west Deneb is the top star with bright Vega directly underneath and slightly dimmer Altair holding down the left corner of the triangle.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.