

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

Quick!!! If you haven't ever seen the planet Mercury, now is your time to get outside for a quick look. Quick that is if you go out any evening between now and Saturday.

Mercury is the innermost planet and can only be seen for short periods of time when it appears near sunrise and sunset.

The planet's quick movements led ancient astronomers to associate it with the mythical Mercury, the fleet-footed messenger of the gods.

Any evening about a half-hour after sunset at a place with a good, clear view of the south-western horizon will do. Binoculars will help because of the thick atmospheric soup in that direction.

The tiny dot of Mercury will be easy to find because of the big, bright dot of Venus, the next planet out from the Sun, will be right above and slightly left of it. In fact, they should both appear in the same binocular field of view if they are placed on the extreme outer edges of the view field.

As long as we are talking about planets there are three other of our fellow solar system travelers which will be on display this week.

First very bright Jupiter, the king of all the planets, is set for some good early evening viewing. Last week Jupiter gave us a good show when it paired with the moon for a couple of evenings.

These conjunctions of the moon and Jupiter will continue into March of next year. If you would like to mark your calendar, check off Dec. 6, Jan. 2 and 29, Feb. 25 (which will also include the queen of the planets, Venus), and March 25.

The March conjunction will be the best to observe. The next night, March 26, the moon will cozy up with Venus. Can someone say "photo-op?"

All of these will be in the early evening so no late night viewing will be necessary.

While you are marking the calendar, include a check-mark for March 12/13, that will be the close meeting of Jupiter and Venus. They will be close all week, but that will be the night they are closest.

Another planet visible now is Mars. Best viewing will be after midnight when it rises over the eastern horizon. Right now it is near the equally reddish star Aldebaran in Taurus, the Bull.

On Nov. 18 and 19, the moon will pay a visit, best viewing is about 12:30 a.m., local time.

The last of our planetary visitors is ringed Saturn, but that will have to wait until early morning, or if you are an early riser that is a good enough reason to get out and take a look.

Look in the east about an hour before sunrise, the star Spica in Virgo, the Maiden will be to Saturn's lower right. The pair are about the same brightness.

There are two other planets which can be seen now, Uranus and Neptune. But they are dim and difficult to locate without expert help.

Now, I can hear the question of the tip of your tongues right now. Why does the moon visit all these planets on a recurring basis? The answer is easy. Two words, the ecliptic.

The ecliptic is the path that marks out the orbital plane of our solar system. It is also the path the Sun follows as it passes across the sky. The moon's orbit around Earth also follows the

ecliptic which explains the frequent meetings.

SKY WATCH: Third quarter moon on Friday, Nov.18. The annual Leonid meteor shower will peak the morning of Nov. 17/18. But, with the moon being at about the same place the shower will appear to come from not many of them will be seen. And, at an hourly-peak rate of only 10 meteors per hour, I don't think it is something get out of bed for.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.