Mr. Lonely waits to be seen in the autumnal night sky

By Vernon Whetstone
Amateur Astronomer

Hopefully by now you have noticed that the Sun is ever so slowly moving farther south, and the noontime shadows are getting longer.

Daylight hours are getting shorter, and much to the delight of my fellow astronomers, the dark hours are getting longer.

These clues, and the fact that school has started, should be enough to tell us that summer is about over and autumn is coming.

There are also clues that can be found in the stars. Our old friends in the Summer Triangle are now standing directly overhead in the early evening hours.

In fact, Vega, the brightest star in Lyra, the Harp, will be directly overhead on the evening of Sept. 10.

In the east, the Great Square of Pegasus is rising and can be seen about an hour after sunset standing up on one corner looking like a giant baseball diamond.

Our summer friends, Capricornus, Sagittarius, and Scorpius (from left to right) are still visible in the early evening in the south, but not for long.

By the end of September, Scorpius will be gone followed quickly by the other two.

However, with one constellation moving off stage left, another moves in to fill the void, and this one is one of my favorites, Piscis Austrinus, the Southern Fish.

I am sure some of my fellow astronomers are questioning my reasoning (and sanity).

The stars of Piscis Austrinus are so dim that almost none of them can be seen. All but one that is, the very bright star Fomalhaut (pronounced FOAM-a-lot).

Piscis Austrinus is an extremely dim constellation located in the southeast rising at about 10 p.m. MDT. It is a rounded rectangle with Fomalhaut on the eastern end.

In ancient times Fomalhaut was one of the four royal stars of the Persians, but of late it has become known as the loneliest star in the sky because it is the only bright star seen in that area.

The only one, out there all by itself.

I guess that is what draws me to it, I have kind of always favored the underdog. I even cheered for the New York Mets long before they won the World Series in 1969.

Find a nice dark-sky place and look southeast after 10 p.m. MT for Fomalhaut. Binoculars will show the rest of the constellation. Tell “Mr. Lonely” that he still has some friends.

Tonight, Sept. 6, and Friday night, Sept. 7, the moon will bracket the Pleiades star cluster.

The only drawback is both events will be visible after midnight on both evenings.

On Saturday, Sept. 8, the moon moves on into a real close snuggle with the planet Jupiter.

Those living in Central and South America will see the moon occult, or cover up, the planet as it moves across the sky.

For those of us here in the middle of North America the moon will travel just south of the bright planet. Best views are between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. MT.

Next Wednesday, Sept. 12, the moon and Venus will be within the same binocular field of view, again, in the early hours of the morning, around 4 a.m. MT.

SKY WATCH: Third quarter moon, Saturday, Sept. 8.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.