

Hoping for dark, clear sky

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

I was finally able to get some glass on Comet PanSTARRS. After several days of clouds there was finally a clear evening with great viewing and I bagged it.

However, I have not been able to view it since. A conspiracy of lack of time and clouds worked together to prevent any opportunity for another view.

Hopefully this week the conspiracy will lift, and another opportunity will present itself; especially this week as the comet will be in close conjunction with one of the most famous astronomical objects of all—the Andromeda Galaxy.

The comet will still be very low on the northwestern horizon so a clear view is needed; no trees, houses, buildings or obstructions can be in the way.

To locate Andromeda we normally use the constellation Pegasus. However, by local sunset it is almost completely below the horizon so another locator assist will be needed.

Fortunately, there is just such a locator available, the constellation Cassiopeia. It is that group of stars just a little further up and to the right that looks like the letter “W” laying on its side.

If we use the stars that form the right side “V” of the “W,” they will point in the general direction of Andromeda about 15 degrees to the lower left,

Both will be visible without any optical aid as very faint and fuzzy patches of light.

The comet and the galaxy will be in the same binocular field of view and they are both about the same brightness—which is to say they won't be very bright at all.

Of course, it should go without saying, you will need to be in a very good dark-sky location away from any artificial light.

The pair should be visible any night this week up to and including Sunday night, April 7. Be looking about an hour after local sunset.

The comet is moving away from the sun and will soon be lost to sight. We will then have to wait until November when Comet C/2012 S1 (ISON) will be blazing in our skies.

Bright Jupiter is still in our early evening sky. It still haunts the vicinity between the horns of Taurus, the Bull. The star visible just to the lower left of the planet is Aldebaran, the brightest star in Taurus.

Aldebaran—the Eye of the Bull—is located in front of the Hyades star cluster, the “V” shape that marks the face of the bull. It is a very nice binocular object.

Another of our favorite binocular objects is just to the right, the tiny Pleiades star cluster.

On the evening of April 12, a slender crescent moon will be below the Pleiades; the next night the moon will be between the two star clusters.

While we are in the area, don't forget to check out our old friend Orion located to the left. He is sinking further toward the horizon each night and will soon be gone until next December.

Saturn, the ringed planet, is now making an appearance in our evening skies. It clears the

horizon at about 9:30 p.m. local time and will be best viewed an hour later.

While a telescope, even a small one, is needed to view its ring system, the pale yellow color of the planet is quite apparent in binoculars.

Next week—Coma Berenices, the realm of the galaxies, and more astronomical blather.