

Come party with the stars

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

Before we begin, a word from our sponsor...well, not really, but this is a shameless commercial for the Nebraska Star Party.

The Nebraska Star Party is an annual gathering of amateur astronomers from not just Nebraska; attendees come from many states and even a few foreign countries.

It is organized by the Lincoln and Omaha astronomy clubs and takes place at Merritt Reservoir near Valentine each summer. This year's dates are Aug. 4-9.

The area around Merritt Reservoir features some of the darkest skies in the state. It's a major draw for astronomers. The star party is also a very family friendly event.

There are activities for everyone including a day set aside for attendees to enjoy a relaxing float trip down the Niobrara River, one of the most scenic in the state with a stop at beautiful Smith Falls, the highest waterfall in Nebraska.

This is also the occasion for the world's largest floating water fight so bring the biggest squirt gun you can find.

Information about the Nebraska Star Party and registration can be found at:
www.nebraskastarparty.org.

This year, if you hang around until Sunday, Aug. 11, you will have the opportunity of viewing the fabulous Perseid Meteor Shower from a very dark-sky place. I have been there once for the shower, you won't forget the experience.

Now, down to business.

We are still able to observe the activity of the planets Venus and Mercury in the west after sunset these nice warm, spring evenings. The best time to look is about a half-hour to 45-minutes after local sunset. Binoculars will be a big help.

Keep watching over the coming weeks as Venus and Mercury move closer together for a nice conjunction on Thursday, June 20.

Not to be outdone, our old friend Saturn has been quietly sneaking up into the evening sky and can now be seen standing almost due south.

Since you are out looking at Mercury and Venus, just turn to your left to find Saturn.

Saturn is near the bright star, Spica, the brightest star in Virgo, the Maiden. When looking at the pair, Saturn is on the left.

SKY WATCH: First quarter moon, Sunday, June 16.

Tonight, Wednesday, June 12, Mercury will be at the highest point it will reach. Astronomers call it "the greatest elongation."

At this point the tiny planet will begin its descent toward the horizon. If you are an asteroid hunter, be outside looking west about an hour after sunset when the sky is good and dark and find the two stars of Gemini, Castor and Pollux. Hint, Pollux is the one on the left.

Using binoculars you can find the largest of the asteroids, Ceres, in the same field of view up and to the left of Pollux at about the 10:00 position. Actually, Ceres is now considered, by the powers that be, a dwarf planet.

If you are still having trouble finding Saturn, wait until Tuesday, June 18, when the moon will give you a hand.

On that evening, the moon will be just to the right of the star Spica and Saturn will be on the other side of the moon.

That is also the evening when Venus and Mercury will be at their closest.

Follow them for the next few evenings as they pass each other.

Also keep watching Venus, on July 3, it will be trying to hide in the stars of the Beehive star cluster—M44.

It will be a fine sight in binoculars or a small telescope.

NEXT WEEK: Summer is coming and more astronomical blathering.