If it twinkles, it's a star

By Vernon Whetstone
Amateur Astronomer

Did you have success finding the elusive planet Neptune last week? I was able to get a quick view of it from my location here in Denver—even with the light-polluted skies.

Caught it in my 10x50 binoculars at about 8:30 in the evening. It looked like a very small blue dot just below the moon, since I have seen it before I knew what to look for.

If you missed it, not to fret, tonight (Wednesday, Nov. 13) you will have another opportunity to find a dim outer planet by again using the moon, this time greenish Uranus.

It too is a very elusive target, even though it is closer to the Sun than Neptune, it is still very small in a telescope or pair of binoculars.

I would suggest you find a very dark-sky location. Even though I found Neptune in the light-polluted skies of Denver, a dark-sky place is a definite advantage. The moon will be much larger, just four days from being full and thus will be much brighter.

They both will be in the same binocular field of view, but I would recommend putting the moon outside your view to better observe the planet. They will be high in the sky in the south. Start looking between 7:30 and 8 p. m. MST. Remember, planets don't twinkle, stars do. So if there are stars in your view, the ones twinkling are stars, not planets.

Now, since we are outside, why not have a nice tour of the sky.

At about 8:30, our old friend Orion will be charging over the eastern horizon. He looks like he is reclining on his right side with his belt pointing straight up. Reddish Betelgeuse marks his right shoulder and bright blue Rigel, hanging just above the horizon, is his knee.

Straight above Orion is the another reddish-orange star, Aldebaran, the brightest star in the "V"-shape face of Taurus, the Bull. I always look at the "V" as the bull's horns, but Aldebaran does a better job of being the eye of Taurus in his face. Put your binoculars on Aldebaran, there is a very nice star cluster, The Hyades," residing right behind it.

Aldebaran is not part of the cluster, it is only about half way to the cluster's 151 light-year distance. It just happens to be along the same line of sight.

Continuing straight up from Taurus is our old friend the Pleiades star cluster, the Seven Sisters. They can be seen without any optical aid in a dark sky, but they are a spectacular sight in binoculars and are almost too large for a telescope.

Continuing straight up and slightly left is another old friend, Perseus. Perseus looks sort of like the capital letter "A" leaning slightly to the left. Once you find Perseus keep going up for the grand finale of our evening observing session, the Double Cluster or Perseus.

They are located about halfway between Perseus and the slightly squashed letter "W" that marks the location of Cassiopeia. Use binoculars because the two clusters are too large for a telescope. To just the unaided eye the clusters look like two fuzzy balls of cotton, but binoculars bring out their true splendor.

Now, I have skipped a couple of other constellations with interesting items, but I am saving them for another time.

SKY WATCH: Third quarter moon on Sunday, Nov. 24. Make it a point to observe the moon every night of the coming week. It will be passing some interesting objects. The Pleiades on Sunday, and Aldebaran on Monday, Jupiter on Wednesday and Thursday. This will be a busy week.

NEXT WEEK: Comet ISON is becoming more visible, and more astronomical blathering.