

## QUAD-CITIES SKY WATCH

# Perseids putting on big show

## Grab a blanket and look northeast for meteor shower

BY CINDY PIPPERT

August is a good time to see the Perseid Meteor Shower. Grab a blanket and head outdoors, preferably someplace dark with a clear view of the sky. No equipment is needed. Lie down on your back and look northeast for the constellation Perseus. He is below Cassiopeia, the giant "W" constellation.

The Perseids are seen between July 17 and Aug. 24. However, peak viewing is after midnight Aug. 12, when a waxing, gibbous moon sets in the west around 1 a.m. The moon gradually will increase in size every day thereafter until it becomes full on Aug. 18. During full moon, the sky will be too bright to see many meteors.

To be strictly correct, a meteor is known as a meteoroid until it hits Earth's atmosphere. At that point it becomes a meteor. If it lands it is called a meteorite. Most burn up in the atmosphere, but occasionally a large one makes it to the ground. Eons ago, a large meteorite landed in Arizona creating a crater a mile wide.

Meteor showers are given names depending on the constellation from which they appear to come. This is called the radiant. For example, the Geminids in December radiate from the constellation Gemini, and the Leonids from Leo in late November. The Perseids are popular because there are typically 50-60 meteors per hour. The Geminids put on a good show too, but seeing them requires braving December weather.

A meteor shower is really caused by debris from extinct comets. The Perseids are remnants of comet Swift-Tuttle. As the Earth revolves around the sun, it travels through comet debris which is an annual event. The amount of meteors we see depends on the angle Earth intersects this debris.

### AT A GLANCE

**WHEN:** Between July 17 and Aug. 24. Peak viewing is after midnight Aug. 12.

**WHAT TO DO:** Gather some friends, blankets, bug spray and a cooler. Find a dark spot, look northeast.

**WHAT YOU'LL SEE:** Most of these meteors just make a quick flash in the sky. Larger ones will create an arc that lasts several seconds. Astronomers are predicting a vigorous display of 100-150 meteors per hour this year.

Comets travel in elliptical orbits. Short period comets originate from the Kuiper Belt, a vast field of microplanets, asteroids and comets just beyond Neptune. These comets make return visits. The most famous is Halley's Comet. My grandfather saw it in 1910. I saw it through a telescope in 1986. It reappears every 76 years and is due back in 2062.

Comets are dirty snowballs consisting of rock, dust, ice and gasses. As they approach the sun, heat causes a visible tail to form and grow in size. Comets actually have two tails. One is the dust tail, the other a gas tail.

► You also are invited to join the Popular Astronomy Club on Aug. 20 in the parking lot of Niabi Zoo for an evening of stargazing (weather permitting). Join us for telescopic views of the planets and other amazing cosmic wonders.

So, enjoy the meteor shower and don't forget to wish upon a falling star.