

Q-C Living

Mercury and Mars vie for May attention

QUAD-CITIES SKY WATCH

BY WAYLAND BAUER

Mercury and Mars will be the “stars” of May in the night sky.

The excitement begins early in the morning May 9, when Mercury will pass between Earth and the sun for the first time since Nov. 8, 2006. This event, known as a “transit,” only occurs about a dozen times each century. We are able to view transits of Mercury and

Venus because they are the only planets inside Earth’s orbit of the sun.

Mercury, a notoriously difficult planet to see, will be visible in broad daylight for about seven hours. It will appear as a tiny dot covering about 1/150th of the sun, crossing the face of the sun from 6:12 a.m. until about 1:40 p.m. local time.

Because Mercury is so small, you need a telescope

with a solar filter to safely view the transit. Join the Popular Astronomy Club in the Niabi Zoo parking lot to view the transit safely through properly equipped telescopes. The club will be there throughout the transit, weather permitting.

The need for a properly solar filtered viewing device cannot be emphasized enough. Do not look at the sun with your eyes or sunglasses.

Also during May, Mars — the second smallest planet in the solar system — makes one of its closest approaches to Earth.

During April, Jupiter has been the brightest object in the sky. Now, it has been dimming as Earth’s orbit takes it farther away from Jupiter. At the same time, Mars is growing brighter as Earth catches up to and eventually passes it.

By the time Mars reaches its peak of brightness in late May, it will be four times brighter than it was at the start of April.

Starting about May 14, Mars can be found low in the southeast sky about 9:30 p.m. By midnight it will climb to about one-fourth of the way of being straight overhead.

On May 22, Mars, the moon, Saturn and the bright star Antares will

form a square in the low southeastern sky. Mars will be at its brightest and well-placed for telescopic viewing on May 22 when it and Earth are closest together.

Join the Popular Astronomy Club at Niabi Zoo on May 21 to view Mars through a 12-inch telescope. You may be able to see its polar ice caps and different shades of red on its surface.

For more details on the **POPULAR ASTRONOMY CLUB**, contact Wayland Bauer at 563-332-4032 or bauerwp@gmail.com.