

SKYWATCH: Space

Dave Smith, Popular Astronomy Club May 9, 2021

May is a month with some short term celestial events and several important historical space anniversaries.

On May 5, the Eta Aquarid meteor shower peaks, with around 50 meteors per hour from a dark location and best visible about three hours before sunrise on the 6th. The Eta Aquarids occur as Earth passes through the dust path left by Halley's Comet, and actually run their course from April 19 to May 28.

The inner-most planet of the Solar System, Mercury reaches its greatest eastern elongation on the 17th, which is to say that it appears furthest to the East, and therefore highest in the sky, from the Sun as it is viewed from Earth. This puts Mercury relatively high in the evening sky on May 15, when the Popular Astronomy Club of the Quad Cities meets in the parking lot of Niabi Zoo shortly before sunset, weather permitting! The club's mobile observatory will be there, as well as several members' telescopes. The public is invited to participate, and view planets, stars and other objects in space! The Niabi Zoo events are always wonderful educational public outreaches.

Mercury and Venus will appear to be very close in the western sky, about 30 minutes after sunset on May 28th. They will be about half-way between the two bright stars Betelgeuse and Capella. Mars will also be in the western sky, although North of Mercury and Venus, straight up from Betelgeuse.

May 5th is also the 60th anniversary on Alan Shepard's suborbital, 15-minute ride into space, on Freedom 7! He was launched to an altitude of 116.5 miles on a Mercury-Redstone rocket, in 1961, to become the first U.S. astronaut in space. The launch was originally planned for December 5, 1960, which would have preceded Yuri Gagarin's flight for the Soviet Union by more than four months! Al Shepard would go on to fly again as Apollo 14's commander and was the only one of the Original 7 astronauts to walk on the Moon!

On May 25, 1961, President John Kennedy delivered his famous address to Congress that committed the United States and NASA to landing a man on the Moon and returning him (them) safely to Earth. This speech was made less than three weeks after Al Shepard achieved America's first 15-minute venture into space! Of course, NASA met that challenge by landing, and returning, Apollo 11 in July, 1969. Actually, NASA accomplished two Lunar landings by the end of the 1960's, with Apollo 12 landing that November.

The Apollo 10, the second mission to the Moon, occurred in May of 1969, as a dress rehearsal for Apollo 11. Commander Tom Stafford, Command Module Pilot John Young and Lunar Module Pilot Gene Cernan entered lunar orbit on May 21 in command/service

module, "Charlie Brown". Stafford and Cernan conducted a simulated lunar landing, on the 22nd in the lunar module, "Snoopy". They descended to 47,400 feet above the Moon's cratered surface. The Apollo 10 Trio ignited Charlie Brown's engine and left lunar orbit on May 24th. They splashed down in the Pacific Ocean two days later. This flight was the third space flight for Tom Stafford. He would fly one more time as Commander of the U.S. half of the Apollo/Soyuz Program. John Young's third flight (of six space flights) was a practice run for his Apollo 16 flight and consequent walk on the Moon. Apollo 10 was also a practice flight for Gene Cernan's Last flight, Apollo 17, during which he became the last man, to date, to walk on the Moon.