

May is a good time to look up

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Popular Astronomy Club

May has a busy sky to keep observers active and interested.

The most notable event in the heavens this month occurs during the first week, mostly from May 4 to May 6. The Eta Aquariid meteor shower is at its peak during this period.

The Aquariids are associated with Halley's Comet, and they happen because Earth passes through the dust trail left behind by the great comet. The dust particles slam into our atmosphere at about 66 kilometers per second.

The shower has historically produced an average of 55 meteors per hour, with some leaving persistent trails across the sky. Since the moon is new on May 4, the sky should be dark.

Jupiter will be quite bright all month, rising at 11 p.m., give or take, depending on the night of the month. Saturn follows its larger sibling into the show about two hours later, but considerably fainter. Venus should still be visible, bright, but low in the morning sky.

Mars will shine fairly brightly in the evenings after sunset, and Mercury will join Mars late in May. The moon will be full on May 19.

There are also locally and nationally significant dates in astronomical and space history to note this month. On May 2, the Gamble Observatory and John Deere Planetarium, both located at Augustana College in Rock Island, will celebrate their 50th anniversaries! The Paul Castle Observatory south of Milan also was dedicated in May, in the year 2010.

On the morning of May 5, 1961, Al Shepard became America's first man in space, spending 15 sub-orbital minutes in his tiny Mercury capsule. It was a significant but humble start to an awesome United States manned space program!

Then, on May 25, President John Kennedy committed the United States to landing a man on the moon by the end of 1969, and returning him safely to the Earth. We did it twice before the decade was done!

May 18 to May 26 is the 50th anniversary of Apollo 10, which had Tom Stafford as commander, Gene Cernan as lunar module pilot, and John Young as the command module pilot.

Apollo 10 conducted a full-blown dress rehearsal of landing men on the moon, flying to and orbiting the moon, and using the lunar module to drop to within about 60,000 feet of the surface. This mission paved the way for Apollo 11's successful first manned landing on our closest cosmic neighbor, in July 1969.

Young and Cernan would later have the privilege of commanding their own missions to the moon, Apollos 15 and 17, respectively.

Keep looking up!



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This image made available by NASA shows the planet Mars. This composite photo was created from over 100 images of Mars taken by Viking Orbiters in the 1970s. Mars will shine fairly brightly in the evenings in the month of May.

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