

Snake River Skies

Magic Valley Astronomical Society

MVAS Meeting: Saturday April 10th, 2004, 7pm Herrett Center, College of Southern Idaho

Join us for our monthly meeting, April 10th, at the Herrett Center. Representatives from DFM Engineering, who are here this week installing the Herrett Observatory telescope, will be speaking.

See you there!



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April 2004

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Message from the President: Phil Hafer

As we emerge from the chill of winter, we can look forward to many warm weather activities. This month we have **Astronomy Day** on Saturday the 24th.

The Herrett Center has requested our assistance for the following activities:

- Water bottle rockets/ make and take activities.
- We would like to have 2 MVAS volunteers to assist with building of rockets and assembly of other projects.

Solar Viewing

- The solar telescopes will be set up on the patio off of the Allen Hall.
- We need one MVAS volunteer to make sure the scopes are tracking the Sun and explain the views to the visitors.

Scale model of the solar system walk

- One MVAS volunteer to assist Chris Anderson with the set up of this display along North College. This individual would need to

be there at noon to assist Chris.

Evening Star Party

- As many MVAS Members with their telescopes to share their love of astronomy with the public.

MVAS display/with handouts

- One MVAS member to man a display promoting the club in the Allen Hall. We need some telescopes to have on display, as well as photos taken by club members. We will also have a handouts from Sky and Telescope with a mailer for a free issue of NightSky magazine.

We also have a need for members and telescopes on April 30th for the annual overnigher for grade school kids. As you can see, we have a busy month of activities. Until next month dark skies and clear nights.

Astronomy Day: Saturday April 24th

Join us Saturday April 24th for the annual Astronomy Day at the Herrett Center. Rick Greenawald and Chris Anderson have planned several activities for Astronomy Day that will be fun and educational for all ages. Planetarium shows will be running all afternoon and the evening.

Volunteers are needed to assist for many of the activities, including answering questions about Astronomy and our club. If you are interested, please contact a club officer.

Thanks for helping out!

MVAS Officers 2004

- *Phil Hafer, President 734-8719 phafer@pmt.org*
- *Cheri Lowman, Vice President, 736-7293, clrc@rmci.net*
- *Rick Widmer, Secretary/ Webmaster, 539-5162, rwidmer@developersdesk.com*
- *Matt Holmquist, Treasurer, 735-5085, mholmquist@coopernorman.com*

Write to MVAS P.O. Box 5101, Twin Falls, ID 83303

If you would like to write an article or otherwise make an entry for the club newsletter, contact Jay Sneddon, 736-2447, jaysneddon@yahoo.com.

Yearly membership is \$20 per person, \$20 per family \$10 per student, Sponsor \$100

Astronomy Day: A History *courtesy astroleague.org*

History

Astronomy Day was born in California in 1973. Doug Berger, then president of the Astronomical Association of Northern California, decided that rather than try to entice people to travel long distances to visit observatory open houses, they would set up telescopes closer to where the people were - busy locations - urban locations like street corners, shopping malls, parks, etc.

His strategy paid off. Not only did Astronomy Day go over with a bang, not only did the public find out about the astronomy club, they found out about future observatory open houses. Since the public got a chance to look through a portable telescope, they were hooked. Then wanted to see what went on at the bigger telescopes, so they turned out in droves at the next observatory open house.

About Astronomy Day

Astronomy Day is a grass roots movement to share the joy of astronomy with the general population - "Bringing Astronomy to the People."

On Astronomy Day, thousands of people who have never looked through a telescope will have an opportunity to see first hand what has so many amateur and professional astronomers all excited. Astronomy clubs, science museums, observatories, universities, planetariums, laboratories, libraries, and nature centers host special events and activities to acquaint their population with local astronomical resources and facilities. It is an astronomical PR event that helps highlight ways the general public can get involved with astronomy - or at least get some of their questions about astronomy answered.

Astronomy Day at the Herrett Center is April 24th.

Saturn Grows Larger in Cassini's Sights *by space.com staff*

NASA's Cassini spacecraft is getting close enough to Saturn to photograph subtle features in the ringed planet's atmosphere. A new image shows two small, faint dark spots that the craft hadn't detected before.

Cassini is due to arrive at Saturn July 1.

The new image, released April 2nd, was taken March when the spacecraft was then 35 million miles (56.4 million kilometers) from Saturn, slightly more than one-third of the distance from Earth to the Sun. The planet is 23 percent larger in this image than it appeared in the preceding color image, taken four weeks earlier. The image shows Saturn in natural color. Contrast and colors were slightly enhanced, however, to make features more prominent.

The planet casts a stark shadow on its rings, which are made of icy particle ranging in size from dust to boulders and even small, embedded moons. Astronomers [aren't sure](#) how the rings were created.

The two dark spots are visible in the planet's southern hemisphere. Mission scientists expect them to become clearer in the coming months. Atmospheric spots on Jupi-



The Cassini spacecraft made this image of Saturn on March 8, 2004. It was released April 2. Credit: NASA/JPL/Space Science Institute

ter and Saturn occur frequently and can last days, weeks or months. They are often akin to storms on Earth but, because the giant planets have no land to disrupt the flow of clouds, the storms or spots can endure for longer periods.

The spots are located at 38 degrees South latitude.

Cassini will study Saturn's atmosphere, rings and moons and is expected to discover new, small moons within the rings. Piggy-backed on the spacecraft is the

Huygens probe, which will descend into the atmosphere of Saturn's largest Moon, Titan, early next year. The probe may land on a hard surface or perhaps on a strange sea with huge waves.

The Cassini-Huygens mission is a cooperative project of NASA, the European Space Agency and the Italian Space Agency. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory, a division of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, manages the project for NASA. The imaging team is based at the Space Science Institute, Boulder, Colorado.

Coming in May: Comets Near and Linear from SkyandTelescope.com

The two comets will put on rather different performances.

For skywatchers living at north temperate latitudes, Comet NEAT promises the easiest show to watch. In **early May**, just when NEAT is brightest, it will rapidly climb out of the Sun's glare into good view above the southwestern horizon after sunset. By the middle of May it will be high in the dark sky of late evening even as it begins to fade. It will remain ideally placed for viewing high in the northwest after dark through June and July as it dwindles away into the distance, eventually becoming visible only in telescopes.

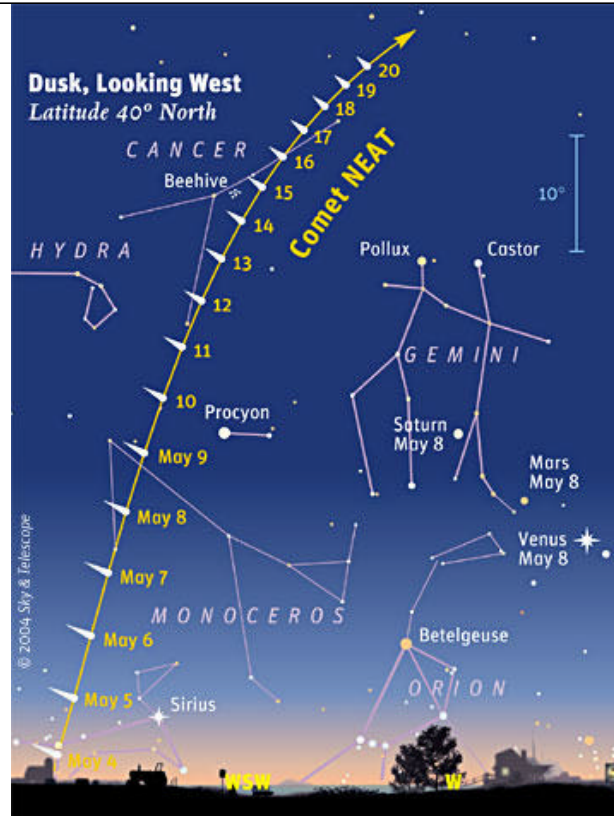
Comet LINEAR may get a little brighter, but it will act more coy. In April and the first days of May it just peeks over the eastern dawn horizon, appearing quite low in the brightening dawn; bring your binoculars. When LINEAR is at its brightest in mid-May, it will be hidden in the Sun's glare (well to the Sun's south). Then in late May and June it will show itself a little higher above the west-southwest horizon at dusk, fading all the while.

On **May 5th** Comet NEAT passes 9° from Sirius, the sky's brightest star. On the **6th** NEAT is closest to Earth (0.321 a.u.) and should be about at its peak brightness, perhaps magnitude 2.5. On **May 7th** NEAT passes just 1° northwest of the 5th-magnitude open cluster M47 in Puppis.

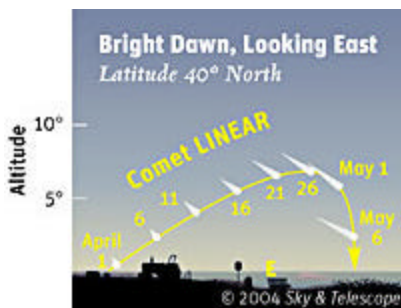
Comet NEAT reaches perihelion on **May 15th**, 0.962 a.u. from the Sun, barely closer to the Sun than Earth is. At this time the comet will be just a couple of degrees away from M44, the Beehive Cluster.

May 19th brings Comet LINEAR's closest approach to Earth (only 0.266 a.u.) and its time of greatest brightness: perhaps magnitude 2. By this time Southern Hemisphere viewers will be seeing both comets in the *evening* sky at once (see the lower chart on the previous page). On the **22nd** (local date for North America), only about 3° will separate LINEAR's head and Sirius.

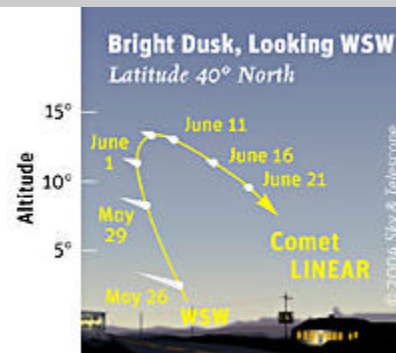
Late in May midnorthern observers get their turn to see **both comets at once** — NEAT high in the western evening sky at about 4th magnitude, LINEAR emerging low in the west-southwest a little past its prime.



In early May, Comet NEAT climbs higher every day above the southwestern sunset horizon. The comet could be visible to the naked eye, but binoculars provide a much better chance of seeing it. By mid-May, NEAT will be well up in the west even after twilight gives way to darkness — though the comet will be fading daily. The dates plotted are civil dates for North America. The horizon is drawn for early May; later in the month the horizon will be higher at dusk with respect to the stars. S&T illustration.



For skywatchers at the latitudes of the US and Europe, Comet LINEAR peeks above the eastern dawn horizon in late April and early May. Sky & Telescope illustration.



After it ducks back around the Sun, Comet LINEAR will be visible to observers in the US and Europe in the west during evening twilight. Sky & Telescope illustration.



Magic Valley
Astronomical Society

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Planet Roundup courtesy skyandtelescope.com

Mercury is rapidly fading and descending back into the sunset glow. Catch it while you still can! Look 30 or 40 minutes after sunset far below Venus and perhaps a bit to the right, as shown at the top of this page. Binoculars will help.

Venus (magnitude -4.4 , in Taurus) is the brilliant white "Evening Star" blazing grandly in the west during twilight and much of the evening. It sets around 11:30 p.m. daylight saving time. In a telescope, Venus is barely past dichotomy (half-lit phase) on its way to becoming a crescent.

Mars (magnitude $+1.4$, in Taurus) glows to Venus's upper left, by a little less than a fist-width at arm's length. Mars is a bit fainter than similarly colored Aldebaran to its left or lower left.

Jupiter (magnitude -2.4 , in the feet of Leo) is the second-brightest point of light in the evening sky, after Venus. It shines high in the southeast at dusk and at its highest in the south by 11 p.m. daylight saving time.

Saturn (magnitude $+0.1$, in the feet of Gemini) shines high in the southwest during evening, high above Orion. It's nearly midway between bright Capella, far to its right, and bright Procyon, far to its left.

Uranus and **Neptune** are still hard to observe in the glow of dawn.

Pluto (magnitude 14, in Ophiuchus) is in the south before dawn.

Club Calendar

The Magic Valley Astronomical Society meets the second Saturday of each month at the College of Southern Idaho, Herrett Center at 7pm. Star Party at the Herrett Center follows.

Saturday April 10th MVAS Club Meeting, 7pm Herrett Center. Public Star Party follows.

Saturday April 24th Astronomy Day at the Herrett Center. Shows and Activities throughout the day and into the evening, starting at Noon. Star Party that evening. Volunteers needed.

Friday April 30th Science Trek Star Party at the Herrett Center. Telescopes and volunteers needed!

Saturday May 8th MVAS Club Meeting, 7pm Herrett Center. Public Star Party follows.