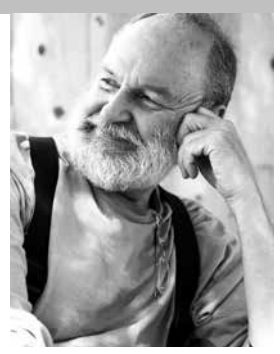
THE STARRY SIDE

An early morning to remember

BY GREELEY WELLS



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Between 3 and 4 am on December 14, 2018, I had the greatest meteor experience of all my 75 years: the Geminid meteor shower.

In approximately one hour (including time spent dressing, getting my chair, walking outside, and setting up), I saw 29 meteors. Some were large, with strong trails lasting for seconds. *And there were two meteors at once!* I've never, ever seen that! They were so close together and literally simultaneous! "Wow!" I yelled to the universe. It was truly a morning to remember.

Now, what is so exciting about a tiny fast-moving dot in the night sky? I really don't know, but I feel it every time. It's like a gift. It's a surprise because it's always unpredictable. I sometimes feel like I'm the only human being to see that particular little event, making it somehow personal and special. I feel a little sorry for anyone who's not had this experience, and I feel so glad for all of us who have.

You might think a person crazy to get up before dawn on a dark winter morning, bundle up against the cold, and tuck into a reclining chair, just to look up at the sky for some specks that may or may not show up. Maybe you'd be right, but only until the show begins. Then you'd hear shouts of joy and surprise, as meteors fall. And, as tiny as they are, there's something so special about them.

I guess you'll just have to experience it for yourself to know what this crazy person is even talking about. And I do wish that for you—mark your calendar now for December 14, 2019, when the Geminid shower is expected to peak once again next winter. Or catch the upcoming Lyrid and Eta Aquarid meteor showers this spring (see "Of Note" below).

Speaking of spring, it's a hint in the not-too-distant future. Orion and all those constellations around him are setting in the west. The last one to rise—Sirius, Orion's faithful dog—is higher in the sky as he swings west, the brightest thing in the southern sky along with Jupiter.

Overhead in spring, the Big Dipper is jumping over the North Star. Follow the handle to Arcturus, that always-bright sentinel. And parallel with the dipper, directly overhead, is Leo the Lion, with his backwards question-mark head and mane and a triangle for a rear end. Regulus is the bright period at the end of the question mark.

The Gemini Twins and a bit of Orion's shoulders and subtle triangular head set in the west. To the south, bright Sirius gets closer and closer to setting with the winter sky.

The east shows the summer stars rising, with bright Vega and the hourglass of Hercules. The fascinating crown of Corona Borealis is a sweet, unique C shape, right between Hercules and Arcturus—three in a row.

Happy dark clear skies, longer nights, and comfortable weather.

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Photo: Astronomical Calendar *by Guy Ottewell.*

Of Note

Venus, the planet, is that bright morning "star" all season.

Mercury, the planet, is a dim dawn "star" in April only.

Mars sinks lower and lower into the evening sunset during the season.

Jupiter is visible all night this season, dusk to dawn.

Saturn is also visible dusk to dawn, but less bright.

Equinox: March 20. Happy spring, the vernal equinox! The sunrise is due east and sunset due west everywhere earth-wide. This means sunrise and sunset are at the same hour/minute in the morning and evening.

Lyrid meteor shower: April 22-23. An average of 20 meteors an hour is expected. Some moon interference, but still worth seeing. Early morning is best. Meteors will seem to radiate from Lyra in the summer triangle.

Eta Aquarid meteor shower: May 6-7. The early new moon guarantees a dark morning for this shower's peak. Look toward the eastern horizon in early morning for the radiant near Aquarius. The meteors will be all over the sky—an estimated 30 per hour. They are actually dust from Halley's comet! Each year on the same date, we go through the path left in space by that comet.