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THE STARRY SIDE

Orange suns and strange sunsets

BY GREELEY WELLS

It's been quite a year for night skies. After a long winter, many storms and cloudy nights came the wildfires (not even ours), that filled the sky, and still do, with particulate matter that dulls the dark of the sky and its points of light, our stars. Many a night I let out a sigh....

There's good news in this. Each clear night is a real treat and joy. Also I'm not always opposed to a little editing of the sky, it shows up the bright guys with less distractions from the infinity of little and tiny stars. It's actually easier to see many constellations though they may be missing their "lesser" stars. However, some constellations are made up of "lesser" stars and disappear completely!

Recently I've noticed that a full, or nearly, full moon shining into this particulate sky can really do some big editing. Sometimes I've seen the east lighten and almost glow even before the expected moon has shown its face. The west may still be fairly dark till the moon makes it all the way up.

Passing the Applegate Lake on the way home one night, I found the Red Buttes gone, the sky with almost no stars and hardly black in the middle of the night! This is an exaggeration of what is called arial perspective which is the name for the fading of things, mountains and such, into the distance. So things close are crisp and dark and the atmosphere adds lightness and fading to distant things making them appear farther away. It's a nice effect, think of Chinese landscape paintings, but these days it's almost too exaggerated to be fun.

And how about those sunset colors and that orangey sun most all the day? The sunsets themselves often have an incredibly unreal warmth. A little scary for those of us used to the danger of fires. Well it's an interesting, different and luckily temporary part of life, especially here in the fire weary west.

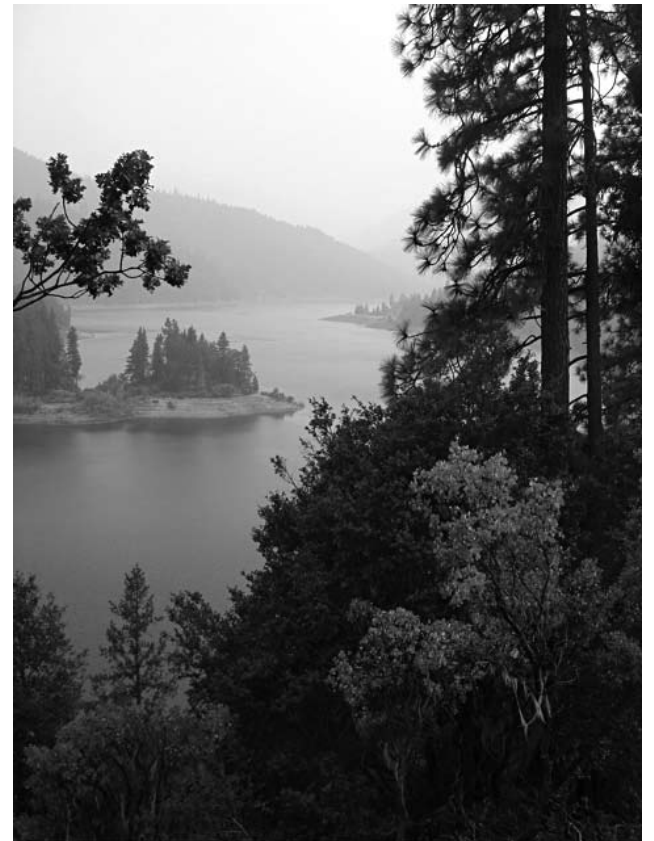
THE PLANETS

Venus, Mercury and Mars are dancing in the sunset, low above the western or northwestern horizon line at sunset. Venus and Mars conjunct [join or get close] on September 11th. By the end of October Venus is setting full two hours after sunset and is therefore much higher in the west and is it's wonderful, bright and beautiful female self. How can a star [planet] be female? I don't know, it just is!

Jupiter is pretty low in the south at dusk above the handle of the Teapot of Sagittarius. By September's end it's setting at about midnight. In October it's setting even earlier in the evening.

Saturn sinks out of sight into the sun on September 8th. Then it starts rising in the dawn till by the end of the month when it rises two hours before the sun. So it starts the month in the sunset and then moves to the sunrise, cool. In October it is in Leo and by month's end it rising 4 1/2 hours before the sun. During all this it's rings have been getting narrower and narrower, as we see them more and more on edge. That's for you telescopes.

Mars' part of the dance with Venus ends as it fades along with Mercury into the sun's glare. Mars will



Applegate Lake seen through a smoky haze.
 Photo: Greeley Wells

not be seen for two months but Mercury will rise in October in the dawn and will have glided past Spica in Virgo by month's end.

OF SPECIAL NOTE

So it's about 400 years since Galileo looked through his telescope and changed completely the way we understand the stars, planets, sun and our dear earth's position in it all. At my writing of this article in July it's NASA's 50th birthday. Its birth was primarily triggered by Russia's Sputnik 1. And all that ongoing activity has continued to change our view of it all. Visit NASA.GOV for a portfolio of 50 years of amazing images. Galileo would be proud.

The Autumn Equinox is on September 22nd. On October 17th the moon occults (goes in front of) the Pleiades for us in the northwest. And on Oct 21st the Orionid Meteor shower peaks in the early morning. The moonlight will interfere with sighting these meteors, so put your back to the east and lean back looking away from the moon at the western, northern and southern skies. The meteors should appear to go over your head towards the eastern horizon where the meteor's radiant is joined by that pesky moon. Any meteors you see that don't follow that pattern are not Orionids but some of the background regulars that appear every night.

The full moon in September is the Harvest Moon and is on the 15th. October's full moon appears on the 14th. It's moon is sometimes the Harvest moon too, when it's fullness is closer to the equinox. This year it's September's turn.

Greeley Wells

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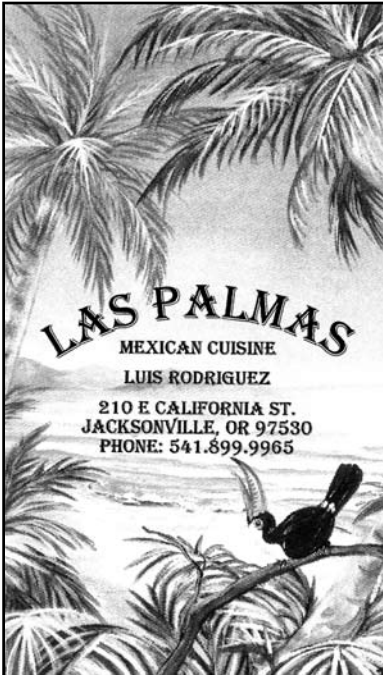
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