

An up-close view of Mars? Not likely, says Penn State Erie professor

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Thinking about cozying up with your sweetheart later this month for a once-in-a-lifetime-chance to view Mars at its closest contact to Earth in recorded history? Think again, and bump up that quality time by a couple of weeks.

An e-mail is circulating claiming that on Aug. 27, Mars will be within 34,649,589 miles of Earth -- "the closest approach between the two planets in recorded history." For that evening, Mars will "be the brightest object in the night sky" aside from the moon. The e-mail purports that Mars will be easy to spot: viewable as early as 10 p.m. at the beginning of August and 12:30 a.m. by month's end when the two planets are closest.

According to Roger Knacke, director of the School of Science at Penn State Erie and professor of physics and astronomy, the e-mail is a hoax.

"Mars will be very faint for the next week, and then disappear in the sun's glare," Knacke explained. "Currently, the best way to view Mars is 30 minutes after sunset with binoculars at about eight degrees above the western horizon. Unfortunately, that low of a point in the sky is very often covered by clouds in Erie."

Knacke also rebuts the claim that "Mars will look as large as the full moon to the naked eye."

"Mars is never close to the size of the Moon," he continued. "At best,

Mars is a bright point of light to the naked eye, and a small round image when viewed through a telescope."

Knacke added that the images accompanying the e-mail appear to be processed from the Hubble Space Telescope or, possibly, from a spacecraft approaching Mars.

Source: Penn State

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