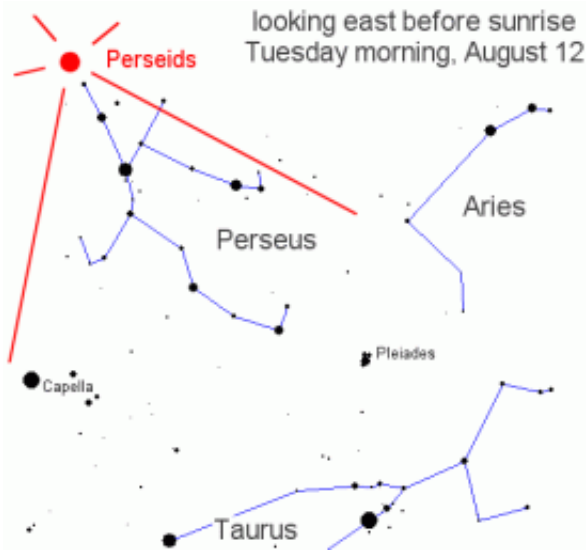


The 2008 Perseid Meteor Shower

22 July 2008



The eastern sky viewed during the hours before sunrise on Tuesday, Aug. 12, 2008.

Mark your calendar: The 2008 Perseid meteor shower peaks on August 12th and it should be a good show.

"The time to look is during the dark hours before dawn on Tuesday, August 12th," says Bill Cooke of NASA's Meteoroid Environment Office at the Marshall Space Flight Center. "There should be plenty of meteors--perhaps one or two every minute."

The source of the shower is Comet Swift-Tuttle. Although the comet is far away, currently located beyond the orbit of Uranus, a trail of debris from the comet stretches all the way back to Earth. Crossing the trail in August, Earth will be pelted by specks of comet dust hitting the atmosphere at 132,000 mph. At that speed, even a flimsy speck of dust makes a vivid streak of light when it disintegrates--a meteor! Because, Swift-Tuttle's meteors streak out of the constellation Perseus, they are called "Perseids."

Serious meteor hunters will begin their watch early,

on Monday evening, August 11th, around 9 pm when Perseus first rises in the northeast. This is the time to look for Perseid Earthgrazers--meteors that approach from the horizon and skim the atmosphere overhead like a stone skipping across the surface of a pond.

"Earthgrazers are long, slow and colorful; they are among the most beautiful of meteors," says Cooke. He cautions that an hour of watching may net only a few of these at most, but seeing even one can make the whole night worthwhile.

A warm summer night. Bright meteors skipping overhead. And the peak is yet to come. What could be better?

The answer lies halfway up the southern sky: Jupiter and the gibbous Moon converge on August 11th and 12th for a close encounter in the constellation Sagittarius: sky map. It's a grand sight visible even from light-polluted cities.

For a while the beautiful Moon will interfere with the Perseids, lunar glare wiping out all but the brightest meteors. Yin-yang. The situation reverses itself at 2 am on Tuesday morning, August 12th, when the Moon sets and leaves behind a dark sky for the Perseids. The shower will surge into the darkness, peppering the sky with dozens and perhaps hundreds of meteors until dawn.

For maximum effect, "get away from city lights," Cooke advises. The brightest Perseids can be seen from cities, he allows, but the greater flurry of faint, delicate meteors is visible only from the countryside. (Scouts, this is a good time to go camping.)

The Perseids are coming. Enjoy the show!

Source: Science@NASA, by Dr. Tony Phillips

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