

Meteor shower is possible next week

17 May 2006

Comet Schwassmann-Wachmann 3 will be visible this week and next through telescopes or on the Internet and might produce a meteor shower Monday night.

The comet won't be particularly bright but it is producing abundant debris as it breaks apart. "To see a comet self-destruct is always fun," Andrew Fraknoi, chairman of the astronomy program at Foothill College, told The San Jose Mercury (Calif.) News.

Comets, consisting of ice and dirt, vaporize when they approach the sun and that material burns when it enters the Earth's atmosphere, producing meteors.

Schwassmann-Wachmann 3, discovered in 1930 by two German astronomers, is coming closer to Earth than any comet during the past two decades, the newspaper said.

But, despite some reports to the contrary, astronomers say the comet will not hit the Earth.

Steve Maran, a retired NASA astronomer and author of "Astronomy for Dummies," says the comet is more than 6 million miles away -- about 24 times the distance between the Earth and the moon.

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