

Northern lights may become monthly show for at least a year

Chances are you've seen the Northern Lights at least once in a year, but recent solar activity might turn that into a monthly event until at least mid-2013. According to University of Michigan space weather expert Tamas Gombosi, "The solar cycle is increasing, and so we are going to get more storms. Once an eruption happens on the sun, even the biggest ones, we'll have at least a day's warning." Back in late January, a powerful solar storm reached Earth's magnetic field, resulting in impressive auroral lights in the polar latitudes. Dan Vergano, the science reporter for *USA Today* explains, "The S3-class storm, on a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) scale that rises from S1 to S5, represents the opening salvo in the coming peak of outbursts over the next year or so." While activity will definitely increase, unfortunately we won't catch every burst. "Most solar eruptions fired off by the sun are pointed away from Earth just as there are plenty of hur-



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The Sky's the Limit

ricanes that never come onshore and just head off into the ocean. Most solar storms are the same," explains Gombosi.

Sky watch for the next month

Mars is closest to Earth on March 5. After supper, look east as Mars rises for that evening. It will be up all night until it sets in the west at dawn. You should get a good view as it is closest to Earth for the year, but pay no attention to those rumours that it'll be as close as the Moon. That's the stuff science fiction is made of!

Saturn will follow the moon to Daylights Savings Time. You might lose an hours sleep March 11, but it's not a total loss as you can get a good view with the naked eye of Saturn on top of the moon. Unless you can see the moon —

no need for binoculars this time!

The spring equinox's warmer days officially start coming March 19 at 10:14 p.m. in the evening.

The Zodiacal Lights are a faint, roughly triangular, whitish glow seen in the night sky extended up from the vicinity of the sun along the ecliptic or zodiac. Discovered by the astronomer Giovanni Domenico Cassini in 1683 and later explained by Nicolas Fatio de Duillier in 1684, they're tough to find, but this year, there will be several opportunities to get a glimpse. The best time is from March 10 for two weeks in the northwest after twilight.

Public events for the next month

Mark down March 9 at 7:30 p.m. on your calendar and join us at the Vulcan Tourism and Trek Station for our monthly star gazing. A short indoor presentation is followed by outdoor gazing with the telescope (weather pending). Treats and refreshments are provided free of charge, and everyone is welcome. For further information, con-

tact the Trek Station at 403-485-2994, or visit the website www.vulcantourism.com.

The Saturday Observer's Night, which is hosted by the All Star Telescope (<http://www.all-startelescope.com/>) just outside Didsbury, takes place March 24, starting at 7 p.m. until midnight. This telescope dealer has a heated showroom, which has bathroom facilities and provides free refreshments. I am planning to attend, and you are welcome to caravan with a group I am assembling, leaving Vulcan around 3:30 p.m. weather permitting. We stop for a Chinese buffet before heading to the celestial farm for the evening. For further information, contact Ken From at 866-310-8844 or visit www.all-startelescope.com/index.php/Observer-Nights.html.

Neel Roberts is a member of the Calgary chapter of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. Neel welcomes your questions and comments at 403-485-2683 and Neel_Roberts@ptccanada.com.