



Preface

There is a widespread impression that the scientific appreciation of the universe must be left wholly to those who have had years of formal training or who devote a large part of their free time to science as a hobby. It isn't true, of course, and it's less true now than ever before. Thanks to the Web, volunteers with little specific training are now assisting scientists in tasks as diverse as classifying galaxies, searching for lunar features, and monitoring bird nesting sites.

But you don't need expensive equipment, a steep investment of free time or even a broadband connection to start observing the heavens. All you need are your eyes.

Everyone takes a moment to sky-gaze now and then – admiring the colors of a Sunset, pondering the Man in the Moon or playing connect-the-dots with bright stars. And while most of us are denied the awesome pleasure of a clear, dark country sky far from the tawny glow of city lights, we can still observe the solar system's brightest members – the Sun, the Moon and five planets. Their ever-changing configurations fascinated and puzzled sky watchers for the first few thousand years of human civilization, a time when the human eye was the primary observing tool. Tracking their wanderings through the sky requires nothing more than good weather and some guidance on when and where to look.

That's where *Celestial Delights* comes in. It's a resource that lays out the best, most observable events for years to come and supplies the background necessary to understand and appreciate them. Think of it as a *TV Guide* to the sky.

The first goal of this book is to share the simple beauties of the sky as seen by our ancestors, sights still available to all of us. By using the Moon and brighter planets as celestial signposts, the tables and charts in this book serve as a guide to every planet that can be seen easily with the unaided eye. Separate chapters detail upcoming eclipses, introduce the major constellations, describe the best meteor

showers, and explore other more challenging, if less predictable, phenomena. The Timetable of Celestial Events (Appendix A) provides an almanac of easy-to-see astronomical occurrences from 2011 through 2020, all organized by date and time and cross-referenced with diagrams and tables found elsewhere in the book.

A secondary goal is to explore how we see the sky from the perspective of our spacefaring culture, one that has literally touched some of the worlds that human-kind has watched, prayed to and feared for ages. An exciting burst of planetary exploration is currently under way. Plans for the decade include continuing robotic exploration of the Moon, Mars, Mercury, and Saturn, and spacecraft are now en route to asteroids, comets and Pluto. I have attempted to share something of the excitement felt and the challenges faced by those who continue to delve into the long-observed phenomena that this book describes.

I hope you'll come to enjoy the beauty of the heavens that is, after all, everyone's heritage, and encourage you to participate in this centuries-old delight. All you need to get started is to occasionally look up and wonder: "What is that bright star?" With this book, the answer is literally within your grasp.

Bowie, MD.

Francis Reddy

Celestial Delights

The Best Astronomical Events Through 2020

Reddy, F.

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