What's Up

By Vernon Whetstone

Well troops, astronomically speaking, there is not much going on this week. Of course, there is always something going on, but we, as humans, think in terms of something big or else it is not interesting.

Tonight (Wednesday) will be a good opportunity to locate one of the dim outer gas giant planets, Neptune. The moon will be a help. Go to your favorite dark-sky place with your binoculars and look in the south for the crescent moon.

About six degrees — a little more than the width of the binocular field of view — look for a tiny blue-green dot to the right of the moon. The planet will look different than the stars around it, the planet will not be twinkling. The moon will visit Neptune again on Dec. 28 if you miss it this time.

The bright dot to the lower right of the moon is Venus. It is making a nice evening presentation for the next several weeks. It is rising higher each evening and will visit Neptune on Jan. 12.

Below and left of the moon/Neptune pair is our old friend Fomalhaut, the loneliest star in the sky. I say “lonely” because there are no other stars to be seen around it.

Fomalhaut is the brightest star in the constellation Piscis Austrinus, the Southern Fish. While Fomalhaut is a first magnitude star, all the other stars in the constellation are much dimmer at fourth and fifth magnitude. I always make it a point to say hello when I see it, just so it won’t be so lonely you know.

On Dec. 3 use the moon again to locate another of the outer gas giants, this time Uranus will be visited. Again the pair will be slightly beyond the width of the binocular field of view. The planet will be directly below the first quarter moon.

Jupiter, another of the outer gas giants, is still holding place as the king of the evening sky. Look about half-way up the eastern sky about an hour after sunset. The bright stars to the lower left of Jupiter are Aldebaran, the brightest star in Taurus, the Bull and further left is Capella, the brightest star in Auriga, the Charioteer.

If you are a morning person, about an hour before sunrise another of the outer gas giants, this time Saturn, will be pairing up with the bright star Spica in the southeast.

Wow, for not much happening, that all seems like a lot. There will be a total lunar eclipse on Saturday, Dec. 10. More about that next time.

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