

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

Let's take another look at the "Celestial Sea." A glance to the southeast these nice early autumn evenings will reveal—not much worth looking at.

There are no bright stars in that direction, there are only a few "faint fuzzies" that might attract our attention, and the constellations that are there are faint and can only be discovered with some difficulty.

The reason for the scarcity when looking in that direction is we are gazing out of the flat part of our spiral galaxy, The Milky Way.

The only really bright star in that direction is Fomalhaut, the brightest star in Piscis Austrinus, the Southern Fish.

I have no historical background for this, but I like to think one reason all the constellations in this area are associated with the ocean is when the ancient sailors from Babylon or Greece sailed south, either on purpose or by accident, they likened it to sailing away from the landmarks they used on the land.

Going that far from what they knew into something totally new. The stars didn't look like what they were used to, there were no familiar shapes. It was like being out on the ocean where sea and sky met, hence the "Celestial Ocean" with stars and constellations they named after things associated with water.

Fomalhaut is a bright, first magnitude star, about 25-light years away. About the same distance as Vega in the constellation Lyra. Except Vega is in the plane of the Milky Way and Fomalhaut is below the galactic plane.

I call it the “Loneliest Star” because there are no other bright stars around and the other stars of Piscis Austrinus are dimmer and difficult to find. It is sort of out there all by itself.

If you are out about an hour after sunset, look southeast and say hello to my lonely friend. I am sure he would appreciate the company.

I had a very nice opportunity to observe Mercury last week. I was traveling east on a local highway heading to a conference in a far-distant city.

As is typical with such things here in western Nebraska, I had to leave at 4:30 in the morning in order to arrive on time in a city three hours and a time-zone change away.

About an hour into my trip I noticed a bright dot rising over the eastern horizon. Trying to remember any recent glance at a star chart, I couldn't come up with any idea of what it could be, and I knew there were no bright stars in that area.

After stopping for breakfast (I don't have a chance to go to such places often, so I take every opportunity I am given) I whipped out my trusty cell phone with the sky charts on it and discovered it was the planet Mercury.

If you are out early any day in the next week at about an hour before sunrise, check out the eastern horizon, you might grab a glance of Mercury for yourself. As the week progresses binoculars might be useful because the planet is dropping lower each day and will be more difficult to find.

SKY WATCH: Venus is still hanging on in the west. Look no later than a half-hour after sunset. Mars is the very dim dot up and about six degrees to the right of bright Venus.

As Venus is leaving the sky, Jupiter is joining the party from the east. Jupiter is located in the constellation Pisces just below the Great Square of Pegasus.

The Summer Triangle is still directly overhead almost as if they don't want to relinquish control of the sky to the stars of autumn. But, four minutes at a time the autumnal stars are creeping up over the eastern horizon followed in the early morning by the beacons of winter. The bright stars of Orion, the Hunter, are above the eastern horizon by 1:30 a.m. MDT and by 5:30 a.m. MDT are standing due south.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.