

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

For all of my LOTR friends I must apologize for missing Durin's Day. For all of the non-LOTR friends, Durin's Day is the Dwarf's New Year in honor of their ancient and first king, Durin I.

According to a passage from "The Hobbit," Durin's Day is when the last Moon of autumn can be seen in the sky at the same time as the Sun at sunset.

That particular event occurred on Tuesday, Dec. 7 when a very slender crescent Moon could be seen in the western sky just at sunset. Winter starts on Dec. 21, so this particular lunar sequence is the "last Moon" of autumn. If nothing else it sounds like a good reason for a party to me.

Had a nice experience last week. I was called and told by one of my astronomy students that a discussion was in progress on a local radio station as to what the large, bright object shining in the eastern morning sky.

I called the station the next day and they said there was indeed a discussion and promptly put me on the air to get the final information. The first question they asked was, "What do 'astrologers' say this is?"

After I "gently" corrected him that astronomy and astrology are not the same thing, I confirmed the object was the planet Venus in a morning appearance and in six months it will transfer to an evening object.

The on-air personality said he was glad because it had been described as everything from a star to a satellite to a rocket to a UFO. We then had a discussion of what events might be happening in the near future in the sky.

Speaking of coming events, don't forget the Geminid Meteor shower on the evening of Dec. 13/14. The first-quarter Moon will be out of the way by midnight so viewing should be good. Find your favorite dark-sky place and enjoy. Aahh, another good reason for a party.

Total lunar eclipse on the evening of Dec. 20/21 will be visible from this area, in fact, from most of the North American continent.

The Moon will enter the penumbral, or outer, shadow at about 10:30 p.m. MST but no appreciable darkening will be noticed until about an hour later when it enters the umbral, or inner, shadow.

Totality will last until about 2 a.m. and the Moon will leave the shadow area an hour later. The thing about a total lunar eclipse is the color shading on the Moon's face, it has been known to become very reddish.

If you have clouds or no access to a clear sky you might want to try the Slooh public access on-line telescope. In order to do so you must establish a free account which can be done at: <http://bit.ly/1PJWRx>. I would do it soon because on-line use will be very heavy.

SKY WATCH: First quarter Moon on Dec. 13, Jupiter is still high in the evening sky. The Moon and Neptune will be close on Dec. 10. Look for a slender crescent Moon in the southwest, Neptune will be to the left about six degrees, just a little more than the width of a binocular field of view.

The Moon, Jupiter, and Uranus will be cozy on Dec. 13, the same evening as the Geminid shower. Venus is indeed a bright morning object in the southeast and right now she has a

companion. The comet Ikeya-Muraka can be located directly right of the planet. It is well within a binocular field of view. Look an hour and a half or so before sunrise. At present the comet appears as a fuzzy, green blob. Happy hunting.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.