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Amateur Astronomer

Easy to be wimpy in this weather–but worth the view

The weather is such now that it is becoming difficult to be outside for any lengthy viewing sessions. With temperatures dropping into the mid to low 20s by early evening it is just not very comfortable to be outside for the couple of hours we could spend in the summer.

This is where we separate the true astronomers from the wimps. I am afraid to confess this, but I sometimes–well often–fall into the “wimp” category when it comes to viewing out in the cold.

Unless it is an extremely interesting event, I will stay inside. The same can be said for my attitude towards early morning viewing. It has to be really worth it for me to be outside at 3 a.m. to observe an astronomical event.

Now, having said that, I am going to get you outside for a quick session. Tomorrow, after your Thanksgiving dinner has had a chance to digest, and before you want to get to the leftovers for second session, get your coats and hats and head outside for a “cosmic quickie.”

About an hour after sunset go out and look west for what I call the “Three Celestial Thanksgiving Birds.” It really is our old friend the Summer Triangle.

The highest of the three component stars is Deneb, the tail star in Cygnus, the Swan. Down and lower to the left is Altair, the eye of Aquila, the Eagle, and off to the right is Vega, the brightest star in Lyra, the Harp.

I know, I can hear you saying it now, “How is a harp a bird?” Well, Lyra has not always been associated with a harp. In the ancient past it was often linked to a bird of some sort. At one time in some places it was even called a turtle.

In India early astronomers called it a vulture and other cultures saw it as a bird who brought storms, a Thunderbird. In fact, just 200 or so years ago, astronomers in early America thought of Aquila as an eagle holding a harp.

Now, since we are already outside on our “Cosmic Quickie,” after viewing the three other birds of Thanksgiving, turn around and face east for a look at the biggest planet of them all, bright Jupiter. It will be about a quarter of the way up the sky from the horizon.

One other interesting thing, if you remember the triangle from our summer sessions, Vega was the highest star. Now Deneb has taken that place.

For some other viewing information, if you look north you will find the Big Dipper hugging the horizon, down from its usual high and lofty position.

SKY WATCH: New moon, Friday, Nov. 25. After our recent planetary tour there were two other planets that, while visible, are difficult to locate unless there is a viewing aid. In the coming days the moon will help to locate them. First, Wednesday, Nov. 30, about an hour after sunset look south for a slightly crescent moon.

The planet Neptune will be about seven degrees, just a bit wider than a binocular field of view, off to the left. Then on Saturday, Dec. 3, use the moon again to locate the other outer gas-giant

planet, Uranus. The planet will be about three degrees below the just-past first quarter moon. That will put the planet inside the same field of view. However, put the moon up and out of view so the glare will not overwhelm the view of the planet. A good, dark-sky place will help with the viewing possibilities. Happy hunting.