Astronomical snipe hunt

By Vernon Whetstone
Amateur Astronomer

It is difficult wanting to write about astronomical events, but especially challenging writing this column before the events occur.

Take for example last Monday's early morning partial lunar eclipse.

True, it was only a partial eclipse, and from my location only a very small portion of the eclipse was seen before the moon sat in the west.

It was not much to write home about, in fact, it was almost identical to the last partial lunar eclipse, and happening so early in the morning could give one pause trying to determine if it was really something you wanted to get out of bed for.

The other event happening after this column was written was the Tuesday, June 5, transit of Venus.

As discussed before, a transit happens when either Mercury or Venus pass between Earth and the Sun, such event being visible against the face of the Sun.

The hard part is, I don't know if there will be clear skies or clouds. The last event, a partial solar eclipse, was clouded out where I was, just as the event was starting.

I had to watch the rest of it using a live computer link. Not as good as being there, but serviceable nonetheless.

We'll just have to wait until next week for a record of the adventures had.

In the mean time, how about a nice astronomical snipe hunt?

I think we all know what a traditional snipe hunt is.

When I was a Boy Scout, we older scouts would take great pleasure regaling the younger, newer boys with tails of previous hunts and the fun to be had. Then sending them out on the trails with a gunny sack seeking the elusive non-existant creature.

Well, technically, there is a real bird called a snipe, but I will not go into details here.

What I am talking about is seeking an astronomical object that is only seen from mid-northern latitudes for a short time.

That is the time when the top part of the southern constellation Centaurus rises ever so slightly above the southern horizon for a short time each evening during June.

Nestled in the top part of that constellation is the most brilliant globular star cluster in the entire sky, the Omega Centauri cluster. It has been recognized for more than 2,000 years when it was listed by the ancient astronomer, Ptolemy, on his star maps.

This will be a difficult object to locate and observe. First find the planet Saturn located due south at about 9:30pm MDT. Directly below will be the stars of Centauri's top and almost on the due south line, very low—not more than two degrees—above the horizon will be the faint smudge of the star cluster.

To pull the object out of the atmospheric soup on the horizon, binoculars will help, but a

telescope will be much better if you have access to one.

Happy hunting, and let me know if you “caught the proverbial snipe.”

SKY WATCH: Full moon, Monday, June 4. Jupiter returns to the morning sky on June 10. It will be quite near a very old moon on Sunday, June 17, at about 4:30am MDT. Shortly thereafter Venus will join the party.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.