

Spring has sprung

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

“Spring has sprung, the grass is riz, I wonder where the flowers is?” Or so goes the old saying. And spring has sprung, or at least it did today, Wednesday, March 20, at 5:02 a.m. MDT. For those in other time zones, adjust the time accordingly.

Technically, spring—or the vernal equinox—is when the Sun crosses the celestial equator moving north along the horizon.

In England and the colonies (that was us), spring was set as March 25. That was also the day that was declared to be the first day of the year.

That was changed by Parliament in 1752 when New Year’s Day was moved to Jan. 1, and the first day of spring was returned to its astronomical date.

Comet PanSTARRS is still an object that is viewable to the west. Start looking about a half-hour after local sunset in the west. It will be about 10 degrees above the horizon right above where the Sun set.

In other astronomical news, the moon is an object to follow this week.

Tonight it is near the feet of Gemini, and tomorrow (Thursday, March 21) it will be between Gemini and Cancer, but be sure to catch it on March 22, when it will be below Cancer and very near M44, the Beehive star cluster. It will be a nice view in binoculars.

Friday evening, March 23, the moon will be near Regulus, the brightest star in Leo, the Lion. Leo is one of the spring constellations and is rising above the eastern horizon.

For you early risers, look east about a half-hour before sunrise on Thursday, March 21, for a small, bright dot of light near the eastern horizon, that will be the planet Mercury. Binoculars will be essential.

If you place Mercury in the center of your field of view, the planet Neptune will be at the very edge of the field at the three o’clock position. Slide the view slightly right and you will be able to see both of them.

More planetary news, Saturn is rising earlier in the evening sky.

True, it rises at about 11:00 p.m. But it’s becoming more of an evening object. We will be following it in the days to come.

SKY WATCH: First quarter moon yesterday, Tuesday, March 19. Full moon, Wednesday, March 27.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.