

Comet watch— Comet Austin

By Bob Riddle

Comet watch: Comet Austin, discovered on December 6, 1989 by New Zealand comet hunter Rodney Austin, might become a spectacular viewing object this spring. Early predictions by astronomers indicate that Comet Austin should brighten enough to be visible to the naked eye on or about May 25th when it passes within 23 million miles of our planet. When discovered, the comet was nearly 230 million miles from the Earth.

It is important to remember that predictions of the comet's visibility are just that—predictions—and since comets don't always heed astronomer's forecasts, there is a chance that Comet Austin will not reach its predicted brightness. However, the path Comet Austin will follow can be predicted more accurately than its brightness.

Its path arcs through the constellations of Pisces, Aries, Andromeda, Pegasus, Delphinus, and Aquila. These constellations set after sun-

set and rise before the Sun, thus providing evening and morning opportunities for comet viewing. Perihelion, when the comet reaches the point in its arc nearest to the Sun, coincides with April's full moon on the 9th. At this point and for the next two weeks, Comet Austin will be difficult to see as it swings around the Sun and moves toward Earth, becoming visible in the predawn skies.

On April 11th, however, the planet Mercury is visible as a bright "star" and may serve as a guide to locating the comet. About an hour after sunset, use binoculars and slowly scan for the comet along the west-northwest horizon. Mercury is just north of due west, and Comet Austin should be visible to the right of Mercury as you

face west. These will be fleeting glances of the comet as it moves into our morning skies, where we will have an extended period for comet viewing.

From mid-April until May's full moon (May 9) the comet may be visible with the naked eye. During this time, look along the east-north-east horizon for the comet about one-and-a-half hours before sunrise. By the morning of April 25th, the comet will be located about 12 degrees above the horizon. And by May 9th, the comet should rise to 40 degrees above the eastern horizon (see figure).

Following May's full moon, the comet makes its closest approach toward our planet on May 25th. If Comet Austin reaches its expected brightness, this should be the best comet viewing opportunity since 1975 when Comet West graced our skies.

And if Comet Austin does not brighten as predicted? In addition to Comet Austin, several planets will be visible in the early morning skies. During April, the two innermost planets, Mercury and Venus, are both visible above the east to southeast horizon about an hour before sunrise. To the right of Venus (west), look for the red planet Mars over the southern horizon. A trio of outer planets, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, also rise before the Sun and are just above the teapot-shaped constellation Sagittarius. They can be easily viewed with binoculars low over the south-southwest horizon. Still farther west, near the constellation Libra, is the planet Pluto, invisible to all but larger telescopes, but nonetheless there.

So keep your eyes on the skies. The next few months should prove to be prime periods for rare glimpses of what lies beyond our planet. ■

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