

# Stargazing: What to look for in August 2020

## Jupiter and Saturn

Look low down in the south in the evening after dark. Find what looks like the brightest star you can see. Is there another one, less bright, a little way to its left? If so, you have probably found the planets Jupiter (the brighter one) and Saturn.

Here's an image I took a few years ago, when the planets were in different positions. Here, Jupiter is the bright object near the middle of the picture. Saturn is a little less bright, towards the lower right of the image. The little cluster of stars to the right of Jupiter and above Saturn is the Pleiades cluster, also known as the Seven Sisters. Of course, the planets have both moved now, and will not be seen against the same star background. If you want to see the Pleiades you will have to wait until autumn or winter. Also, the planets are the other way around in the sky now, with Jupiter on the right, and Saturn on the left.



Through a telescope, and even a binocular if it's held steadily enough, it is possible to see up to four moons of Jupiter, which appear as little points of light to one or both sides of the planet.



If you have a telescope, you may be able to see the rings of Saturn.

Image by N Hart

## Meteors

The middle of August is a great time to watch for meteors. Sometimes meteors are called shooting stars, although actually they are not stars at all. Meteors are the very fast streaks of light caused by little bits of space dust or grit that fall at high speed into the Earth's atmosphere and heat up by friction. Every year in August the Earth passes through a stream of space dust left by an ancient comet, and it causes the Perseid meteor shower. Sometimes it's possible to see 30 meteors or more in an hour. This year, the best nights are likely to be 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of August.



Here's a photo of meteors. The short streaks are stars. They appear as lines because the earth's rotation makes it seem as though the stars have moved across the sky while the picture is being taken.

The three longer streaks are meteors. One is disappearing off the top of the photograph.

If you want to look for meteors, take an adult with you and find a place where you are shielded from any lights. It helps if there are people looking in different directions in the sky because then you can find more meteors between you. Use reclining chairs or garden loungers that allow you to lie down, then it will help you stay comfortable and avoid neck ache while you look up. Also, make sure you have warm clothes and a hat. Even on August nights you can get quite cold outside if you're not careful. Look at the sky for a few minutes and you might see a meteor or maybe several of them.

## Other moving objects

You might see little points of light moving slowly across the sky. These are probably aircraft in the atmosphere or satellites that have been launched into space by people. Meteors are extremely fast and soon disappear, so if you see something moving slowly you know it's probably not a meteor.

If it has a light flashing regularly then it is likely to be an aircraft. If there are no flashing lights then it is probably a satellite.

## **Mars**

If you are around late at night towards the end of August, you might see the planet Mars low in the east, looking like a bright star, with a distinctly orange hue.



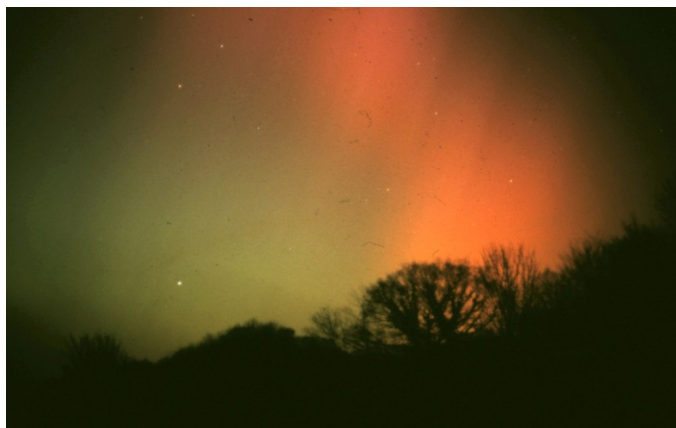
Here's Mars in the lower centre of the picture.

## **Venus**

The planet Venus looks like a dazzling star. It's even brighter than Jupiter. You won't see it in the evening this month, though, but it can be seen in the early morning before the Sun rises.

## **Aurora**

The Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights, is quite a rare sight from Southern Britain. It's a bit more often seen from Scotland and Scandinavia. However, here's a picture of an aurora that I saw from South Wales in April 2000. Notice the green and red glow in the sky.



**Enjoy observing the sky!**

Stargazer Martyn