

By Vernon Whetstone, Benkelman

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Thanksgiving is for the birds, astronomically speaking that is. Aside from the turkey on the table, there are three astronomical birds that attract our attention.

After the large Thanksgiving repast, the football game and afternoon nap, take yourself outside at about 6 p.m. MST and look to the west. You won't even need a dark-sky place, these birds can be seen even under city lighting.

The birds I am talking about make up our old friend, the three stars of the Summer Triangle, just passing from the sky after a long summer of duty.

The brightest is Vega, located on the bottom right side of the triangle just above the horizon a little more than the width of your clenched fist held at arm's length.

Vega is the brightest star in Lyra, the Harp. What has a harp to do with birds, you ask? Good question. Several ancient cultures depicted Lyra as a crane or a stork. One even called it a vulture.

Follow the long side of the triangle left across the bottom to its point to find Altair, the brightest star in Aquila, the Eagle. Now, up and right on the other long side of the triangle to Deneb, the tail star of Cygnus, the Swan.

Cygnus is also called the Northern Cross for its obvious long upright and shorter upper part (the wings of the swan) marking the crosspiece. Deneb marks the top of the cross.

Above our flying friends is another constellation that has feathers—Pegasus, the Flying Horse. At present the "Great Square of Pegasus" is shaped more like a baseball diamond standing up on one corner.

After finding all of these starry objects, go inside and warm up with a nice cup of hot chocolate, or other hot beverage of your choice. Then head back outside about 9 p.m. MST. This time look east where you will find the stars of winter peeking their icy glow above the horizon.

Most prominent of these is Orion, the Hunter, another of our old friends. Above Orion look for the "V" of Taurus, the Bull with bright Aldebaran marking his eye.

Left of Taurus is oblong Auriga, the Charioteer, featuring another bright star, Capella. More about them in future columns.

Now, if you are one of the really brave and hearty star gazers, head back out at about 11:30pm MST, look to the east again for the next planetary "rising star," Mars. It is located just below the very faint constellation of Cancer, the Crab.

Last week, Mars transited M44, the Beehive star cluster, located in Cancer's center.

Mark the location and time of your viewing of Mars, then check its location each week. The red planet will be higher and brighter as the weeks pass. It is on the way to a Jan. 29, 2010 opposition when it will be closest to Earth and opposite the sun in the sky.

OOPS: Confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation I am told. Well, here I must insert an "Oops."

Last week I told you the launch of space shuttle Atlantis scheduled for Nov. 16 was the last. It isn't. There are four more with the last one on July of 2010.

My thanks to the sharp-eyed reader who caught the error and called it to my attention. This column was written well in advance of the launch date of Atlantis, so I don't know if they left on time or not.

If it was launched, you can follow the progress of the mission at www.nasa.gov/multimedia/nasatv/index.html.

Sky watch

First quarter moon, Nov. 25.

On Monday, Nov. 23, there will be an extremely nice conjunction of a six-day old moon, Jupiter and Neptune in the southwestern sky. Look at about 8 p.m. MST.

All three will fit inside the viewing field of a pair of binoculars. A telescope will provide a nice individual view of each object. Mars rises at about 11 p.m., followed in the morning hours just before sunrise by a fading Venus.

Next time: We will talk about the end of the world, and more blather, too.