

## April 2010: Meditations on Sky Phenomena

*April showers bring May flowers*, goes the saying. April in Maine, we expect rain. But mid-spring skies hold potential for more than rainy weather. For one thing, the still chilly air often offers opportunities to see a sundog or two. These commas of light bracketing the sun are technically called parhelia, meaning “beside the sun” in Greek. Caused by the refraction of sunlight through ice crystals, a sundog can be seen any time of year anywhere, though usually when the sun is lower in the sky. Sometimes only one will be visible, just a bright patch of colored light next to the sun. I consider it lucky when I see two, especially if their colors are vivid—they look like fragments of a rainbow which, if completed, would form a perfect circle of light around the sun. I’ve heard that in some atmospheric conditions these halos do occur, accented by sundogs that are always at the same level as the sun.

Several apparent references to sundogs in historic chronicles refer to the phenomenon as “three suns,” and, as with many unusual sights in the sky, they were naturally regarded as portents—good or bad depending on what happened next. According to literary legend, Edward of York saw “three suns” on the morning before a decisive battle in the England’s War of the Roses—and eventually went on to become King Edward IV. Saskatchewan weather lore has it that if you see a sundog, the next day will be bitterly cold—but there are probably many signs that point to it being bitterly cold in Saskatchewan in the winter!

I’m told moondogs also exist, a result of the same light and ice crystal combination that create sundogs, though I’ve never seen one. They require a full moon, though apparently the moon’s light is rarely bright enough to create more than blurry white patches beside the cold white orb. I’ve seen halos around the moon, however. Moon halos are different from moondogs, being caused by the reflection of moonlight off surrounding clouds rather than the refraction of light through ice crystals. The old saying, *Ring around the moon means rain will come soon*, points to the fact that halo = clouds. The April full moon, called by various cultures the Pink Moon (for the bloom of early pink wildflowers), Fish Moon (for the shad run), Seed Moon, or Sprouting Grass Moon, falls on April 28 this year, late enough in the month to actually correspond with sprouting grass and wildflowers here in Maine. To celebrate this month’s full moon, you could play Nick Drake’s beautiful song “Pink Moon” and toast with a bottle of Full Moon ale.

In addition to the Moon, several planets are visible this April. If the skies aren’t clouded by too many April showers and the night air grows a bit warmer, planet viewing could be quite rewarding. Red Mars, which has been with us through the winter, will still be high overhead in the southern night sky. Our brightest planet, Venus, now rises in the west as the Evening Star, an easily recognizable heavenly body that has played a role in the mythologies of cultures around the world. It’s no wonder, because at its brightest, Venus casts shadows. Only the Moon is brighter in our night sky. Venus rises as the Evening Star throughout April, and then disappears for a while to re-emerge as the Morning Star—this

eternal pattern the perfect inspiration over the millennia for stories of birth, death, and resurrection. In mid-April Venus engages in a short dance with the crescent moon—the two will switch places, with the moon moving above Venus. Throughout the month Venus slowly moves higher and more easterly in the sky. Saturn rises in southeastern skies after dusk. Its rings aren't tilted at a sharp enough angle now to be easily visible, but it's always cool to view this big bright planet through a telescope or even binoculars. As an added planetary bonus in April, those with keen eyes may be able to pick out Mercury very close to Venus in the first week of April. Using binoculars right after sunset, look just to the right of Venus for the non-twinkling speck of this tiny, distant planet, which will disappear once more by mid-month.

Another reason to watch the sky near the end of April is the Lyrid meteor shower, so named because the shooting stars appears to emanate from the constellation Lyra. This small constellation is dominated by the star Vega, one of the brighter stars in the April sky. The real source of the meteors is dust from the tail of Comet Thatcher, which the earth passes through this time each year. The drag about meteor showers is that to really maximize your falling star tally and rack up lots of wishes, you ideally need to be looking for them between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m. If you happen to be awake then, put on a warm coat, grab a blanket, find a place away from streetlights and other light pollution, and look up. The peak date for this shower is April 22, but there's a lot of cosmic dust floating around before and after.

A recent *New Yorker* cartoon by P.C. Vey showed a man looking through a telescope saying, "You never really know how boring the sky is till you see it up close." I found that funny enough to write down. (And if, as a friend of mine says, stars and planets leave you cold, keep watching the skies... This is also the month when male woodcocks perform their spectacular mating flights.) But really, as with most things, the closer you look at it, the more interesting the sky becomes. You begin to notice the phases of the moon and the patterns of clouds. Or perhaps the rising Evening Star or a sundog illuminates your day in a small but wonderful way. As spring returns in April, we become focused on the arriving birds, the green haze of leafing trees, and the beauty of blooming flowers. But we should also remember once in a while to look up, to see the sky up close.