

Planetary Wonderings

September Focus: Saturn and September

By Mary-Frances R. Bartels, NASA Solar System Ambassador

The month of September marks several significant anniversaries and events related to the planet Saturn. Let us examine a few.

The month begins with the 30th anniversary of the Pioneer 11 flyby. Pioneer 11, the second in the Pioneer program, investigated the outer solar system, and was the first spacecraft to explore Saturn and its rings up close. In addition to their scientific missions, the Pioneer craft carry a plaque with a message from mankind to whatever extraterrestrial beings may discover them.

On Sept. 4 Saturn's rings will be edge-on as viewed from Earth. This also occurred August 11. Saturn's rings turn edge-on every fourteen to fifteen years. While they are beautiful to observe, their "disappearance" provides an opportunity for Earth viewers to appreciate the planet's strangely blue north pole, a new phenomenon discovered by the Cassini mission. Saturn was closest to earth in March which means, unfortunately, that it is difficult to view this time of year because it is so near the sun in the sky.

Sep 17 is the 220th anniversary of William Herschel's discovery of Saturn's moon Mimas. Mimas has a large impact crater named after Herschel, and coincidentally resembles the *Star Wars* Death Star. Though an accomplished musician, Herschel developed an interest in astronomy. His systematic survey of the sky also led him to discover the planet Uranus, which this year just so happens to be at opposition (closest to Earth) on this day as well.

Sept. 21 is Gustav Holst's 135th birthday. Holst is best known as the composer of "The Planets," a seven-movement orchestral suite. His tribute to Saturn was called "The Bringer of Old Age."

An obscure connection between Saturn and September can be found in Roman mythology and timeless traditions. Saturn was named for the Roman god of agriculture. Countless agriculture-related festivals are held during the months of September and October. One locally notable one occurs in the village near my residence. Each year during the third weekend of September the village of Centerburg, OH, puts on the Oldtime Farming Festival (www.oldtimefarmingfestival.org).

Resource of the Month: Test your knowledge of the "Lord of the Rings" with this Saturn Trivia Quiz at <http://www.funtrivia.com/playquiz/quiz90828a684a8.html>. Some of the answers to the quiz are in this article.

Activity of the Month: Attend a Star Party. Those living near southwest Ohio might be interested in the ScopeOut Astronomy Fair in Cincinnati on the 12th. The Cincinnati Observatory will celebrate the telescope with an open house called ScopeOut. ScopeOut is an opportunity for people of all ages to look at the latest and greatest astronomical equipment. Activities include classes, educational materials, kid's space crafts, safe viewing of the Sun, tours of the observatory's historic buildings, and plenty of door prizes. For more information see: <http://www.cincinnatiobservatory.org/scopeout2009.html>. Readers not in the Cincinnati area might want to look for more local star party opportunities.

<http://www2.jpl.nasa.gov/calendar/#0909> lists some in Nevada, Maryland, Illinois, Maine, and Michigan.

Suggestions, questions, corrections, and comments about “Planetary Wonderings” are welcomed and may be directed to stargazer @ keeplookingup.net (remove spaces). Past columns may be found at www.KeepLookingUp.net (click on “Planetary Wonderings” on the right side of opening screen) and at <http://www.freelists.org/archives/astronomyed/> (columns from Jan. 2007 to the present).

Remember to *keep looking up!*

Sources (not already mentioned in the article):

http://science.nasa.gov/headlines/y2008/18mar_saturn.htm

<http://www.astronomy.com/asy/default.aspx?c=a&id=7992>

<http://www.astroleague.org/al/obsclubs/herschel/fwhershs.html>