

# Summer stars are different

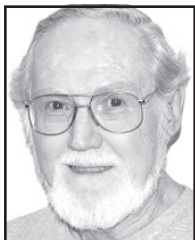
Like many avocations, stargazing can be a year-round activity as any clear night offers interesting things to see. Regardless of the season, there will always be stars and constellations, and often the Moon and one or more planets.

Yet the seasons do affect stargazing, notably summer versus winter. An obvious difference relates to what's available for viewing, since winter and summer night skies feature different constellations.

But first, consider other seasonal differences. Being a cold weather wimp, I confess to preferring summer stargazing. No matter how lovely the winter might be, I can't enjoy viewing it if I'm shivering and my feet and hands are aching cold — so I much prefer warmer weather.

There are, however, some disadvantages to summer stargazing, like summer's later sunsets and earlier sunrises which make for shorter nights. While winter nights offer upwards of 14 hours of darkness (at our latitudes), summer nights can be as short as 10 hours. And there's the inconvenience of darkness coming so late in the summer. With daylight saving time, summer star parties can't get going good before 10 p.m., and that's kind of late for kids and old codgers like me.

And then there are the critters — espe-



**Paul Derrick**

• **Stargazer**

cially mosquitoes. You'll want bug spray, but be careful how you use it at star parties. Never apply spray around telescopes or binoculars as the chemicals can damage the optics.

Snakes and other animals are more active in the summer, so if you're stargazing in a grassy area, be aware. I've never encountered a snake while observing, and hope I never do, but a stargazing buddy, Willie Strickland, had a startling encounter at our astronomy club's observatory.

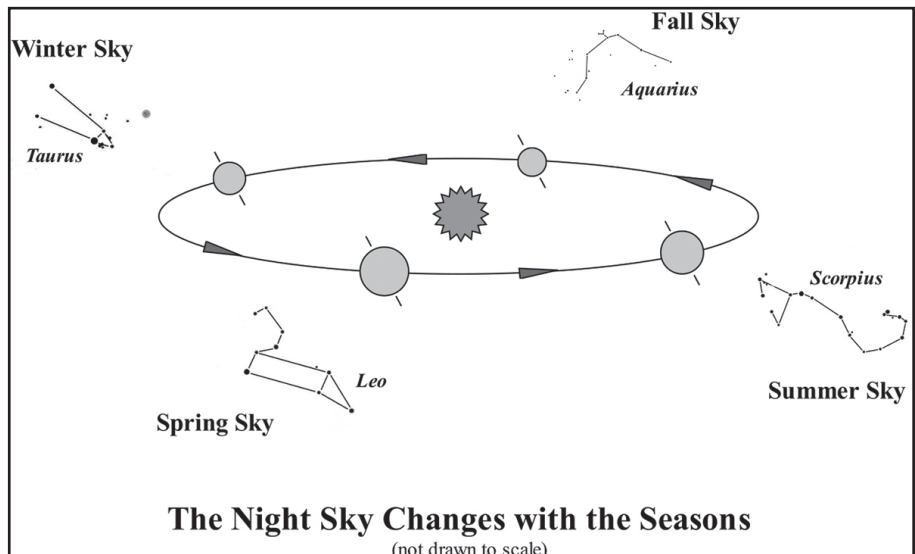
As he was about to unlock the observatory door in the dark, he dimly saw something that made him step back. With his flashlight, he saw a long snake climbing up the door casing on its way to devouring some bird eggs. In our desire to live compatibly with nature, we had left undisturbed a bird nest in the entrance way, not being aware of its attractiveness to snakes. Fortunately, Willie wasn't bitten,

but he was rattled by the experience. We've also encountered skunks and other critters.

In far west Texas, the Davis Mountains and Big Bend National Park are famous for dark skies, making them popular for stargazers. There are potentially hazardous inhabitants, such as black bears, but they are generally people-shy and rarely seen.

But enough of these earthly matters — let's look at the summer sky. As Earth orbits the Sun, the night sky changes with the seasons as different parts are visible at different times of the year — the key words here being "night sky." Every day of the year, all the stars ever visible from any given location come into the sky — some are up at night and can be seen, while the rest are up during day but hidden by sunlight. So when we speak of the summer sky, we mean that part of the sky that's up during the early evenings of summer.

The Milky Way, the galaxy of which we are a part, stretches all the way around the night sky, so part of it is up every night of the year — but the summer sky gets the brightest part. Galaxies are huge disc-shaped clusterings of billions of stars swirling around a central bulge where stars are far more concentrated.



**The Night Sky Changes with the Seasons**  
(not drawn to scale)

The night sky changes with the seasons (diagram by author)

The Milky Way's center happens to be in the heart of the summer sky, in the direction of Sagittarius and Scorpius, the signature constellations of summer. Although intervening cosmic dust and gases prevent our actually seeing into the heart of the galaxy, it is still the brightest and most star-rich area of the Milky Way. Hundreds of globular clusters, special type of star clusters akin to mini-galaxies, swarm around the Milky Way's central bulge, thus most of them are also seen in the summer sky.

But while the summer sky has the better Milky Way, the winter sky has a great-

er concentration of the brightest, first magnitude stars. Sagittarius and Scorpius have but one first magnitude star between them, and the entire summer sky has just seven. The winter sky has nine first magnitude stars, seven within the Great Winter Arc Region. The winter sky also contains Sirius and Canopus, the night sky's two brightest stars.

There are other seasonal differences, but it should be clear that the seasons are not the same when it comes to stargazing.

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## On the Beat

### COLBY POLICE

Thursday

9:06 a.m. — Caller reported vehicle blocking alley entrance at 1175 W. Seventh. Owner not found, will check back.

9:40 a.m. — Chief requested officer at Fike Park about the gazebo. Report filed.

11 a.m. — Trailer recovered in Russell County; cleared from National Crime Information Center.

12:48 p.m. — Accident at Wal-

mart. Minimal damage, private property, no report.

3 p.m. — Checked hitchhiker at Walmart.

3:03 p.m. — Caller reported stolen bike. Report filed.

8:30 p.m. — Officer spoke with subject about riding all-terrain vehicle on city streets.

### THOMAS COUNTY SHERIFF

Thursday

10:50 a.m. — Stalled vehicle

north of airport.

11:04 a.m. — Brought inmate from Rice County to Colby.

12:16 p.m. — Caller reported someone stealing bales on County Rd. 15 south of his feedlot. Spoke to reporting party, said he would handle it himself.

1 p.m. — Helped High Plains Mental Health with tele-conference.

1:56 p.m. — Booked Ladana Boleware.

2:38 p.m. — Helped motorist at I-70 mile 53 westbound.

3 p.m. — Report filed for lost tag.

5:57 p.m. — Helped Colby Fire Department on fire northwest of Colby.

11:17 p.m. — Caller reported possible subject in barn in the 200 block of County Rd. G. Everything OK.

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