

Studying Mars has been challenging ordeal

Space exploration has left dozens of functioning and dead spacecraft and associated debris wandering about the solar system, and nowhere is it more evident than at Mars.

Depending upon whether you count lost or missing space probes, there have been between 43 and 70 missions earmarked for the Red Planet between the year 1960 and the present. Many never came near Mars, failed to achieve orbit, crashed on the planet's surface or simply vanished.

The first successful landing on Mars came with the Viking 1 orbiter in 1975. This was the first attempt to detect signs of life on Mars. Today three orbiters and two rovers are studying Mars, and even more are in the planning stages.

Focus on the planets

Mercury transits, or passes across the face of the sun, on May 9 for the first time since Nov. 8, 2006. Otherwise Mercury will remain hidden for much of the month, barely peeking above the eastern horizon

the last two or three days of the month.

Venus is on the far side of the sun from Earth and is not visible during May.

Mars is at its peak visibility at midmonth but is visible all month. Mars rises in the southeast about two hours after sunset on May 1 but rises in conjunction with sunset by midmonth and stays in view all night. Mars will be at its brightest since 2005 and comes closest to Earth on May 30. Good conditions and a powerful telescope will reveal many surface features of the Red Planet.

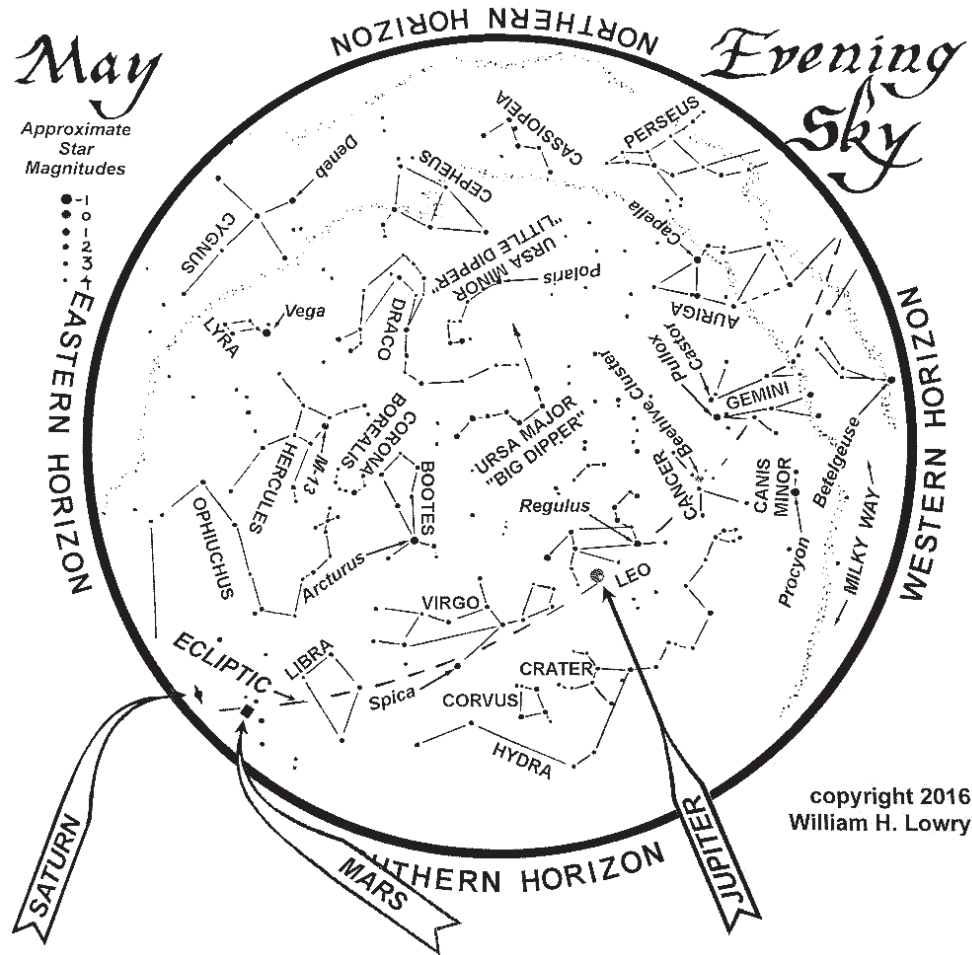
Jupiter is prominent high in the south at nightfall. The giant planet is the brightest object in its section of the sky as May opens but will gradually fade as the month progresses. Still, telescopes will reveal surface features and the incessant dance of the four major moons about the planet.

Saturn trails Mars into the sky by about a half-hour, and the two remain neighbors all month. A large tilt to the ring system offers excellent viewing, and the major moon Titan also is very much in evidence.

Uranus and Neptune are both lost in the Sun during May.

May events

1: Sunrise, 5:26 a.m.; sun-



set, 7:40 p.m. This is May Day or Beltane, a cross-quarter day marking the midpoint between the spring equinox and summer solstice.

5: This is the peak night for the Eta Aquarid meteor

shower. The new moon makes for an excellent viewing opportunity. You can expect an average of 10 to 20 meteors per hour out of the vicinity of Aquarius.

6: The moon is at perigee

or closest approach to Earth. New moon, 3:31 p.m.

7: Looking to the southwest an hour before sunrise will reveal Saturn forming a triangle with Mars to its lower right and Antares to the latter's lower left.

8: The thin crescent moon is in the west about an hour after sunset with Betelgeuse to its immediate left and Aldebaran well to the lower right of the moon.

9: Mercury will transit the sun appearing as a tiny black dot. Caution: Don't look directly at the sun. The safest bet is to watch the event on the Internet or at a local observatory.

13: First-quarter moon, 1:03 p.m. The sun enters Taurus on the ecliptic. Look for Regulus of Leo to the upper left of the moon around 10 p.m.

18: The moon is at apogee or farthest distance from Earth. The sun enters the astrological sign of Gemini.

21: Full moon, 5:14 p.m. The full moon of May is known as the Flower Moon, Milk Moon or Corn Moon. Look for Mars, Saturn and Antares congregating about the moon tonight.

29: Last-quarter moon, 8:12 a.m.

30: Mars is at its nearest approach to Earth and will appear particularly large and bright tonight.

31: Sunrise, 4:53 a.m.; sunset, 8:13 p.m.

Send astronomical queries to Clair Wood at cgme-wood@aol.com or care of the Bangor Daily News, Features Desk, P.O. Box 1329, Bangor, Maine 04402.

Weather doesn't always cooperate for birdwatching

I lead a lot of birding trips and tours. All of them go perfectly. The weather always cooperates. I find every bird we're looking for, and everyone gets great looks.

OK, not really. That's my fantasy. Reality, however, is harder on me.

Take last Sunday. At 8 a.m., seven members of the Penobscot Valley Chapter of Maine Audubon climbed into my van for a whirlwind tour of Mount Desert Island. It was a trip to say goodbye to winter, a last look at wintering sea ducks. The forecast looked acceptable. The day would start cool but would warm to the 50s. We would do OK, as long as there wasn't a north wind.

The north wind howled as we arrived at Thompson Island, gateway to Acadia Na-

tional Park. Worse, the tide was low. (I wish there were a way to predict tides.) There wasn't much water in the channel, and the wind scoured the remaining water free of waterfowl. Sea ducks are accustomed to wind and waves, but it's not something they relish. Ducks will seek out calmer water, and Thompson Island wasn't it.

We headed to Hadley's Point on MDI. The wind was just as punishing there. We managed to see a few common eiders in the distance, nothing more. We climbed back into the van and — "click" — the battery died. Corrosion on a terminal had split the cable connection. We needed a jump start, and we had to leave the engine running for the rest of the day.

I knew our next stop, the Bar Harbor pier, would be equally bracing. We used the van as a windbreak, scanned the harbor and spotted a single black guillemot. Good enough — let's scram. I also knew that the



Female buffleheads (left) and black scoters (right).



BOB DUCHESNE

rest of the day would be spent in harbors and coves, sheltered from the breeze, and our luck might improve.

Thunder Hole proved me right, temporarily. Great Head and Sand Beach blocked most of the wind from torturing us. We spied a flock of 30 purple sandpipers cartwheeling around the prominent offshore ledge known as Old Soaker. A few black guillemots rode the white caps. Looking back in the direction of Sand Beach, I spotted a raft of birds that appeared to be red-necked grebes. Beyond them were tiny white dots that surely were long-tailed ducks.

Otter Cove proved better. Two red-breasted mergansers loafed directly beneath us. They soon were joined by several more. A short distance beyond, four red-

necked grebes snoozed on the surface. All were returning to their brilliant summer plumage. In early winter, the red on the back of the neck is practically invisible. On these guys, it was the color of crab apples. We got good views, then headed off to Seal Harbor, where I knew we'd find lots of birds we'd missed so far.

Not today. Another raft of red-breasted mergansers floated next to the beach, but despite its sheltered location, no other ducks were visible. Even the gulls that normally congregate in this spot were absent. They must all be over in Northeast Harbor.

Wrong again. A couple of female buffleheads paddled beyond the town pier, and that was it. This is normally a good harbor to see long-tailed ducks up close. Not today.

The wind was whipping across Somes Sound so much — we didn't even bother to slow down. The tide was rising, and that promised good birds on the quiet side of the island. I expected good things at Seawall in Manset. I expected purple sandpipers to be roosting in their favorite secret spot. I expected in vain. They were nowhere to be found. However, a nice flock of black scoters ended our day's scoter jinx. With the sun beating on their famously yellow bills, everyone could see how they got the nickname "butterbill."

Surf scoters normally haunt Seawall, too, but not today. They're usually at Bass Harbor Head Light and over by the Swan's Island Ferry, too, but not today. "Not today" became the day's catch phrase. We fi-

nally got some closer looks at buffleheads in Bass Harbor, and acceptable views of long-tailed ducks in Southwest Harbor.

It might have been the wind. It might have been the short winter and an early migration. Whatever, this was a day marked by great scenery and scant birds. But, then, as we disembarked at Fields Pond Audubon Center at the end of the day, a northern harrier flew right over us — the kind of splendid sighting that makes you go out and do it all again tomorrow.

Bob Duchesne serves as vice president of Maine Audubon's Penobscot Valley Chapter. He developed the Maine Birding Trail, with information at mainebirding-trail.com. He can be reached at duchesne@midmaine.com.

Bass

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daughter had a lure on her line, and culling the fish as Sophia caught more and more bass.

Rustin Ames said Sophia caught 80 percent of the fish during the day, and at the end of the tournament, they'd amassed an impressive eight-fish bag. The fish weighed 35.31 pounds, and left the team in second place in the tournament. The winning team's total was only slightly more — 35.36 pounds.

After the bass were released, live, back into the lake, the Ames team took home \$180 for their day's work.

Rustin Ames said he caught the smallest fish of the day, a 2½-pounder. The largest fish they caught weighed 4.5 pounds. And all of the fish in their bag were nearly that size: Their bag averaged 4.41 pounds per fish.

"I've been fishing all of my life — 33 years — and that's the best day of fishing I've ever had," Rustin Ames said. "Obviously, [it was fun] just having it be the first tournament fishing with her, but you just don't see bags of fish like that."

Sophia doesn't fish all the time — the third grader plays some basketball as well — but she said she's not nearly as tenacious or determined



PHOTO COURTESY OF RUSTIN AMES
Sophia Ames, 9, of Orland and Orrington shows off the \$180 she and her father, Rustin Ames, won during her first bass fishing tournament on April 16 on Swan Lake in Swanville.

on the basketball court as she is when she's fishing.

For now, she's fishing with a spinning rod, but her dad says Sophia will probably step up to the more complicated baitcasting reels that most tournament bass anglers use in the near future.

"I think she's at the point that she's ready," he said. "That's all she does is fish. She's such a natural."

And Sophia is also a natural at another angling skill: choosing the right lure. Want to know what lure was working best? What her favorite lure is? Good luck prying that information out of her.

"I'm sworn for secrecy," she said with a sly grin.

Things to Do Outdoors

BANGOR — Penobscot County Soil & Water Conservation District's annual plant sale, 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday, May 7, 1423 Broadway, USDA Service Center back parking lot. Locally grown perennials, herbs, bare-root edible plants and trees, garden seedlings, flowering bushes. Kids Crafting Corner, \$5. Children can decorate flower pot or birdhouse.

BAR HARBOR — Bill Gawley, program manager at Acadia National Park Air and Water Resources, will discuss the high concentrations of air pollutants Acadia National Park periodically experiences, primarily as a result of long-range transport by prevailing winds from large urban and industrial areas in states to the south and west, 5:30-6:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 4, McKay's Public House, 231 Main St. Part of MDI Science Cafe by MDI Biological Laboratory. Free and open to the public. 288-3147.

BAR HARBOR — Symposium on integrative approaches to prevention and treatment of acute and chronic Lyme dis-

ease, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, May 7, Gates Auditorium, 105 Eden St. A panel of experts will dive into the most recent advances in treatment and prevention. Speakers include Dr. Bea Szantyr, Dr. Keelyn Wu, Dr. Meryl Nass and Dr. Richard Matthews. Free and open to the public. mdilyme.org.

BATH — Group hike through Kennebec Estuary Land Trust Sewall Woods Preserve led by Merrymeeting Audubon's Ted Allen, 8 a.m. Saturday, April 30. Group will hike along Whiskeag Creek seeking migrating waterfowl including Canada geese, black ducks, mallards, blue- and green-winged teal and common mergansers. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at CVS in Bath to carpool. Ted Allen, 729-8661.

ELLSWORTH — Spring Clean Up Day, 8 a.m.-noon Saturday, April 30, Woodlawn, 19 Black House Drive, Route 172. Bring work gloves. woodlawnmuseum.org or 667-8671.

GRAND LAKE STREAM — Downeast Lakes Land Trust staff giving introduction to land trust and presentation on recent and planned conservation and land manage-

ment efforts, 6:30 p.m. Friday, May 6, Grand Lake Stream School Building, 15 Water St. Community Forest Tour, 10 a.m. Saturday, May 7. Meet at the school to car-pool. 796-2100 or info@downeastlakes.org.

KINGFIELD — Sustainable Community Symposium on local living and creating a more sustainable community, 7-9 p.m. Friday, May 6, Sugarloaf Outdoor Center, 5092 Sugarloaf Road. Individual tickets may be purchased for \$30 at mainemountainchildrenshouse.org/2016/sustainable-community-symposium/. Drinks, desserts, and entertainment included.

OLD TOWN — Annual Trail Day, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, April 30, Hirundo Wildlife Refuge, 1107 West Old Town Road. Bring a friend, loppers or handsaw and help clear trails. Meet at the Parker Reed shelter. 394-2171.

ORLAND — Spend a spring evening in Great Pond Mountain Wild-lands to hear and see American woodcock do spring mating display, 7:30-8:30 p.m. Friday, April 29. Dress warmly and wear sturdy shoes. Leave dogs at home. Meet at 7:30 p.m. at

South Gate. To register, Cheri, 469-6929, or email info@greatpondtrust.org. Rain date Saturday, April 30. Check Facebook or website for weather cancellations.

SINCLAIR — 2016 Polar Dip sponsored by the Aroostook County Knights of Columbus, noon Sunday, May 1, Long Lake Sporting Club. Registration, 11 a.m. "Chicken pool" for those who prefer not to jump in the lake. Benefits Special Olympics. Duane Belanger, 951-2874, dss-maine@roadrunner.com or FreezeItForSpecialOlympics.com.

For a complete listing of calendar items or to submit your event, visit www.bangordailynews.com.

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