

Fire in the Night

Earth's annual passage through the debris of Comet Swift-Tuttle creates one of summer's most spectacular celestial displays **BY MICHAEL J. CADUTO**

C ELESTIAL events are among the oldest and most profound human experiences of the cosmos, inspiring stories as grand as the sky is wide to explain the marvelous spectacles that arch overhead. Few natural wonders are more awesome than the blazing fireballs that streak across our night skies. The Perseid meteor shower, which appears during some of the warmest nights of the year, can produce up to 100 meteors per hour under ideal viewing conditions.

Though the source of the meteors is the debris field of Comet Swift-Tuttle, the annual light show appears to come from the constellation Perseus, named for the hero in Greek mythology who is famous for beheading Medusa, whose petrifying gaze turned onlookers to stone.

Perseid meteors are not made of stone, per se. They are composed of a mélange of minerals and elements, as well as ice and cosmic dust, all of which produce subtly different colors as they blaze through the atmosphere. Iron emits a golden yellow, nitrogen and oxygen glow red, sodium appears orange, and calcium looks violet.

Although this year's peak occurred Aug. 12-13, the Perseids remain active through about Aug. 24, with occasional meteors still visible under dark skies. Look toward the constellation Perseus, low in the northeastern sky around midnight, and continue watching through the hours before dawn for the best chance of spotting a meteor.

"The Perseid meteor shower is really worth making the effort to watch," said Catherine Miller, observatory specialist at Middlebury College's Mittelman Observatory in Vermont. "In a location with low light pollution, it should be relatively easy to see the Milky Way's countless stars and dark, cloudy bands stretching across the sky, providing a stunning backdrop for the meteor shower."

Each year at this time, Earth passes through the



THE BRIGHTEST OF THESE "FIREBALLS" ARE PRODUCED BY LARGER FRAGMENTS OF THE COMET BURNING UP AS THEY RACE THROUGH EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE AT MORE THAN 130,000 MILES PER HOUR.

debris field of Comet Swift-Tuttle, which was first discovered independently in 1862 by Lewis Swift and Horace Tuttle. The meteors in this shower are especially bright and often leave long trails of glowing light behind them. The brightest of these "fireballs" are produced by larger fragments of the comet burning up as they race through Earth's atmosphere at more than 130,000 miles per hour.

At 16 miles across, Comet Swift-Tuttle is about twice the size of the Chicxulub asteroid that struck the Yucatán Peninsula 66 million years ago. That impact created a crater about 12 miles deep and nearly 100 miles wide, triggering a global winter that ended the age of non-avian dinosaurs and led to the extinction of about three-quarters of all species on Earth. However, we needn't be alarmed; most Perseid

meteors are no bigger than a pebble or a grain of sand and usually burn up before impacting the ground. Swift-Tuttle itself won't pass close enough to Earth to pose a concern until the year 4479, when there's a nearly 100 percent chance it will sail safely by.

The best places for viewing meteors, or "shooting stars," are those with dark skies and minimal artificial light, such as state and national parks and forests. In Connecticut, rural locations away from major commercial development often provide the best views. Websites such as Go Astronomy can help identify particularly dark locations for viewing the night sky. One such location, Stellafane Observatory in Springfield, Vt., is recognized worldwide for its exceptional observing conditions. Members of Stellafane have worked for years with local businesses and governments to minimize light pollution. Educational organizations such as the McAuliffe-Shepard Discovery Center in Concord, N.H., and the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium in St. Johnsbury, Vt., are also great places to learn about the Perseids and related astronomical events.

"The Perseids are very special to me and are a fantastic opportunity for families to spend quality time in wonderment of our vast universe," Miller said. "Growing up, we would find a place to lay down and stare at the sky, getting lost in the expanse of stars."

The remaining days of August still offer opportunities to catch Perseid meteors under clear skies. Bring a blanket or lawn chair, find a dark location with an open view of the sky, and give your eyes time to adjust. In between sightings, see how many stars and constellations you can name.

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EASTON AT WORK

More Than a Backyard Range

Stephanie Niles set out to teach archery. Along the way, she found herself building a community **BY CAYLIN HARRIS**

T HE RANGE sits at the end of a long strip of lawn, hemmed in on one side by a giant stone wall and on the other by forest thick enough that the hemlocks seem to lean over the grass to get a better look. A line of targets runs the length of it. From the road, all you can see is a small wood sign hanging on the fence at the edge of Silver Hill Road. No logo, no lights, nothing that announces itself. Cyclists slow down anyway. Stephanie Niles has heard them from her yard, pointing and saying to each other. "That's an archery range."

It is. It's also, more or less, her whole philosophy in miniature: unassuming, easy to miss if you're not looking, and quietly full.

Niles didn't set out to start a business. She got certified to teach archery almost by accident, back when she was part of a large homeschool co-op in Bethel. A handful of kids asked for a class nobody in the parent pool could teach. "We couldn't find anybody local that wanted to do archery," Niles said. "I'm like, *Well, I think archery's kind of cool. Why don't I try it?*" A Level 1 certification became a Level 2 certification, which turned into a range at a shared workspace, then COVID hit. She decided to turn her backyard into a range so that the kids would have somewhere to keep shooting. "It kind of mushroomed from there," she said.

Niles is a full-time art teacher for twice-exceptional kids, students who are analytically gifted but face challenges in a traditional classroom. JackRabbit Archery isn't her day job. It has, however, become something more durable than a side hustle: a low-key, word-of-mouth institution that people in town know only vaguely until they suddenly need to know about it.

The town has a way of making itself known to her, too. Niles tells the story of coming home one day to find two targets sitting near the edge of her property, no note attached. She went inside baffled. Later, a note turned up in her mailbox: Someone was cleaning out a barn, knew there was a range on Silver Hill Road, and figured she might want the targets. If not, they'd come pick them up.



The fidgeting stops. The shoulders drop. "Everybody kind of stops wiggling," she said. "They become a little more focused, it feels really good because everybody can do it."

She's explicit about what the range isn't. It isn't a competitive circuit, and she isn't building one. "You're not competing against each other," she tells students. "You're competing against yourself to get a little better." That reframing is what lands with the kids who've maybe been told—by other sports, other teams, other adults—that they're not athletic. "I don't want anybody to feel like because they're not good at competitive sports that they shouldn't do sports," Niles said. "Bring your non-athletic children to me."

She also treats every class as a short history lesson before it's a shooting lesson: indigenous cordage and hunting, the wild turkey feathers that once fletched local arrows, the quarter-acre reservation in nearby Trumbull, the shift from sinew bowstrings to modern synthetics. It's not a detour from the sport, in her telling; it's the point of it. "I want them to appreciate what we have now in modern technology," Niles said. "But realize that we didn't invent it."

Ask her what she'd build with unlimited land and no scheduling constraints, and the answer isn't a bigger range. It's a stretch of unbuilt forest with a

"BRING YOUR NON-ATHLETIC CHILDREN TO ME." —Stephanie Niles

It's the kind of exchange that shows up a lot in Easton: quiet, assumptive, generous. And she pays it forward, sending kids home with eggs from her chicken coop. "I know your parents signed you up for archery, not chicken care," Niles said. "But the kids have so much fun finding the eggs that I have to send some home with them."

What actually happens on the range is more deliberate than the folksy edges suggest. Niles starts every new shooter, regardless of age, with the same low bar: get the arrow from the shooting line to the target line. Not a bull's-eye, just forward motion. "I don't care if you hit the target or not," Niles said. "I just don't want it to go sideways." That first small success, she's found, is what quiets people down.



Ready, aim, inspire! Group classes are half the fun at JackRabbit Archery.

campfire circle, an indoor space for shooting on rainy days, room for Indigenous people to reconnect with land and tradition, maybe a coffee shop where music could happen. A place, essentially, like the one she has already built. Just bigger and free.

"A place that's open to everyone," Niles said. "And nobody has to pay for it."

EASTON AT WORK is a periodic series profiling the people behind the businesses, farms, organizations, and creative pursuits that shape Easton.

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