

Raining Fire in the Sky

In the classic song “Rocky Mountain High,” John Denver sang “I’ve seen it raining fire in the sky” after watching the Perseid Meteor shower while camping in the Rockies. You can view the phenomenon in an Iowa campground this summer. July and August make for great family outings to watch meteors.

One of the greatest shows of the year, the Perseid Meteor Shower, teems with a fiery display that ignites the heavens. “Meteors will appear to fall from the constellation Perseus, which rises in the northeast,” says Chris Anderson with the Science Center of Iowa in Des Moines.

Peaking around Aug. 12, up to 60 to 100 meteors per hour can pierce the night as sand grain-sized bits of comet dust hit the Earth’s atmosphere at 132,000 miles per hour.

“They burn up about 60 miles above Earth, but it looks like it happens right overhead,” he says. “Rare, but spectacular fireballs are made when pebble-sized debris enters the atmosphere.”

As the icy Swift-Tuttle comet moves through space, particles are thrown off, leaving a dust cloud. As the Earth passes through it each summer, an annual meteor show illuminates the sky. The pre-dawn morning of Aug. 12 may have the best viewing opportunities.

“An Aug. 16 full moon will interfere with the meteor show. But even with the moon out, you will see the brighter meteors, you just won’t see as many,” says Anderson. Usually midnight to sunrise is the best time to observe. Serious fans will get up early the morning

LEARN MORE

The Planetarium Star Theater at the Science Center of Iowa in Des Moines has an Iowa Skies Tonight program with daily discussions of astronomical viewing opportunities. Log on to www.sci.org or call a local astronomy club or observatory.

of the 11 or 12th. The best showtime begins after 2:30 a.m. after the moon sets.

MAKE THE MOST OF METEOR VIEWING

Escape the light pollution of urban areas. If you live near a brightly lit city, drive away from the glow of city lights northeast toward the constellation Perseus. Find a dark area away from car lights. If you plan on staying home to observe, turn off porch lights.

HERE ARE MORE TIPS:

- Take a nap during the day of planned viewing.
- Take a camping trip during peak days. For viewing, find an open area of the park un-obscured by trees.
- Allow 30 minutes for eyes to fully adjust to darkness. Cover flashlights with red tape to help preserve your night vision.
- Meteors can be all over the sky, just don't focus on one area.
- Take a blanket or camping ground pad or inflatable mattress and pillows.
- Lie on the ground in a reclining lawn chair.
- Bring coffee, hot chocolate for the kids, warm clothes and dress in layers.
- Have kids keep a tally sheet of observed meteors.
- Meteors move too fast to hone in with binoculars and telescopes. Simply look up with the unaided eye.
- Pack insect repellent.