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Amy Seif

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Perseid Meteor Shower Should Give a Good Show August 10: Star Party at UNH Observatory

By [Amy Seif](#)

Communication and Information Coordinator
Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space
603-862-5369

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Editors/News Directors: UNH Professor Eberhard Moebius can be reached at 603-862-3097, and is available until August 7. John Gianforte can be reached at 603-674-6531.

DURHAM, N.H. -- Each year, as the Earth collides with the orbit of pieces of the Swift-Tuttle comet, the sky is lit up with nighttime drama as white-hot streaks of light shoot across space. This year, the University of New Hampshire is celebrating the return of the Perseid meteor shower with a star party at the UNH Observatory Saturday, August 10.

The Perseids are one of two prominent annual meteor showers -- the other being the Leonids in November. Sky watchers can expect to see dozens to hundreds of meteors per hour during the Perseids, and Star Party participants need only stay up until shortly after midnight to catch a good show.

Eberhard Moebius, professor of physics at UNH's Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space, explains, "The Earth encounters the orbit of the comet as it goes around the sun. As the comet comes close to the sun it begins to disintegrate due to the extreme heat. This is what makes the visible impression of a comet. Pieces of the comet come off over thousands of years and spread along the orbit. When the Earth runs into the debris the pieces heat up because of friction, and we see the pieces that heat up to thousands of degrees as light flashes."

According to Moebius, the visible experience of a meteor shower is much like driving headlong into a

snowstorm, with the night sky acting as the windshield. The streaks of light from burning meteors seem to emerge from one point in the center, similar to how snow in a snowstorm seems to come from one point. That central point, in the case of the Perseids, is the constellation Perseus, after which the Perseids are named.

Visitors to the Observatory will learn about Perseus, and where it lies in the night sky. Astronomy experts will explain the phenomenon of a meteor shower, and participants can look through the telescope to see other objects in space, including the International Space Station which will be passing over the region.

The Perseids are best seen with the naked eye in a dark and unobstructed area. A map will be available at the observatory to guide visitors across the street to the Old Durham Reservoir where viewing of meteors will be optimal.

"We are hoping to provide a fun, educational experience for all those attending the star party," says John Gianforte, who teaches astronomy at UNH. "The newly upgraded, computer-controlled 14-inch telescope will provide views of distant astronomical objects, while the viewing of 'pre-peak' Perseids from a darker site will help those new to sky watching spot their first meteor. This is the university's first chance to demonstrate its upgraded facility since work on the observatory was completed in the spring."

The Star Party takes place from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. Aug. 10, and is free and open to the public. Participants are encouraged to bring a flashlight, blanket and bug spray.

The UNH Observatory is located on the left side of Main Street coming from downtown Durham, after the Whittemore Center and the tennis courts.

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