May: Saturday, May 10, is Astronomy Day… no national holiday yet. Many libraries and colleges have some activities that day related to astronomy, so check.

Saturn's ring is closing! Early May the ring is still at a tilt of 10 degrees, but by Christmas it will be nearly invisible at only 1 degree. Late 2009 the tilt drops to 0. For a tilt of 10 degrees you'll have to wait till 2010 and a large tilt of over 20 degrees will not be until 2015. And what is Saturn without its ring? Take a look soon; Saturn is near Regulus in Leo high in the southwestern sky at dusk.

I have mentioned the Pocket Sky Atlas by Sinnott earlier and Amazon has a "special" @ $13.95 (usually $20) for it. To find your ways around the night sky I can also recommend a visit to www.skyviewcafe.com or www.fourmilab.ch/yoursky. You can view and download maps with the constellations drawn in as line-figures with and without their names. These are ideal tools for learning your way around the night sky. You have to enter your location in coordinates, the longitude here is close to 91 degree West and the latitude is 43 degree North (ignore minutes and seconds or set to 0's).

Planet Mars should be visited this month, especially if you have a telescope. Mid May at dusk Mars will be near Cancer's M44, the Beehive cluster, in the western sky about 20 degrees west of bright Regulus (alpha-Leo) along the ecliptic. Watch Mars for a while and you'll notice its motion, even though it is only arc-seconds per minute (on your watch). You won't see the features of Mars, I'm sure.

Behind Leo, eastward, you find Porrima, gamma-Vir, in the southern sky around 10 PM. This is a nice yellowish double and about 10 degrees-of-arc northwest of Spica (remember Big Dipper's handle arcing through Arcturus and continuing to Spica?).

Two asteroids are nearby, which you should try to observe, Daphne and Astraea. Not easy, I warn you! Both asteroids are only of brightness mag 9-10; you'll need thus a telescope.

When our solar system formed approximately 5 billion years ago, a disk of material formed around our new Sun, a proto-planetary-disk or "Proplyd", spinning around the Sun. Nine, OK eight if you insist, planets formed, but there were "left-overs" that did not make it into planets.

Astraea is one of a few dozen that are large enough, approximately 100 miles across, and therefore bright enough (reflecting Sun light), brighter than mag 11, to be observable from Earth with a small scope. They orbit around the Sun at an average distance a bit larger than Mars's. The Sun is about 8 light-minutes from Earth (that's 100 million miles roughly) and this May, Daphne and Astraea are about 12-15 light-minutes from Earth. The stars in Virgo are 100 million l-y away. This gives the appearance of a real slow motion against the background stars. How slow? About one arc-minute per one hour on your wristwatch.

Now where can we find Astraea? During May Astraea makes a half-loop of ¾ degree around a point 3 degrees above Porrima, gamma-Vir, toward delta-Vir, a mag 3 star. See page 47 of the Pocket Sky Atlas or page 70 of May's Sky&Telescope. Best estimate for 05/05/08 (new Moon!) is RA 13h07', Dec 03d00'. Give it a try!

The Starsplitters will try photographing these two minor planets, asteroids, during this month; images 30 minutes apart are contemplated. The results will be uploaded to our web page (www.wyalusing.org at "star gazing" in our gallery). Check by end May or early June.

Clear night skies from Starsplitters! GW