

Our Night Sky in November 2013

Jupiter will be rising in the East at about 9pm, close to, the two brightest stars Castor and Pollux in Gemini, but Venus will be setting shortly after sunset, and will scarcely be visible unless you have a very clear south-western horizon. Mars will be rising in the East about 0300 for those making an early start to the day, and will be quite close to the main star in Leo – Regulus. Meanwhile, the winter stars are making their appearance, with Orion awaking from his summer sleep to once again become one of the most instantly recognisable constellations in our night skies.

I have already seen Orion in the early morning while down in Cornwall last month, and we were lucky enough to have some amazingly clear skies, though not always at convenient times; I twice suggested to the local enthusiasts that the clear sky we had enjoyed all day might provide them with good views of the stars from this wonderfully dark location, only to be proved wrong as cloud rolled in from the sea. However, by the early hours, all the clouds had disappeared, and I was left with a breathtaking array of stars, with the Milky Way and the Andromeda Galaxy clearly visible without binoculars – the latter's light having left it 2 million years ago to activate the light cells at the back of my eye! What an extraordinary thought that is – photons of light leaving another galaxy two million years ago, and the first object they encounter is my eye! I do feel it is incumbent upon parents and grandparents to take their youngsters to a really dark site one night and show them the skies in their true glory which we so thoughtlessly pollute with unnecessary light.

36 years ago NASA's Voyager 1 space probe was launched to explore Jupiter and Saturn, and to help scientists learn more about our solar system. In September this year, scientists learned that, having travelled more than 15.8 billion miles from Earth, Voyager has moved so far from our planet that it is now in what is called interstellar space, or a region of our solar system, where it has come into contact with more particles that were released by distant stars than those from our sun.

In fact, Voyager had arrived here a year before but, because it recorded its findings on an old 8-track cassette recorder (cutting edge technology when launched!), the information had not been retrieved until two months ago. What is really amazing is that a space probe launched in 1977 with technology 36 years old should still be working and sending back information from 16 thousand million miles away, data that will keep scientists analysing and theorising for years to come. I hope to keep you informed of developments.

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