

Meteor Majesty: Perseids

(Originally published 8/12/2020)

Remnants of an ancient comet light up the night each year in August. The Perseids put on a spectacular show when Earth passes through the debris trail of comet Swift-Tuttle. As the particles pass through Earth's atmosphere, they streak the sky with light and colors as they disintegrate. As many as 100 meteors per hour



A meteor streak of the Perseids in West Virginia, 2016. Photo by NASA/Bill Ingalls.

may be seen at the height of the shower. You might even see a fireball or two!

Peak viewing is mid-August during the early morning pre-dawn hours. Set your alarm and get up early. Head outdoors with a folding lawn chair and your favorite morning wake-up beverage. Set up your chair where you have a broad view of the sky and locate the constellation Perseus,* then lay back and enjoy the show. If you are not a morning person, you can start watching after 10 p.m. but it is well worth an early morning rise to see what is considered the best meteor shower of the year.

*Locating Perseus – Look to the north for the bright “W” of Cassiopeia. Perseus is just to the west – just a bit lower and to the left side of the W. (Location varies with time and season so use a star chart for specifics).

Interesting Facts

- 133 years is the time it takes for comet 109P/Swift-Tuttle to orbit the sun just once.
- 1992 was the last year comet Swift-Tuttle visited the inner solar system near Earth.
- Typical meteor streaks are from dust size comet debris particles.
- Fireballs, which are more brilliant and burn longer, are formed by larger debris particles.
- The Perseids get their name from the constellation Perseus because it is the point in the sky from which they appear. (It is only a locational reference, not a source. The source is the Swift-Tuttle comet.)

Activities for Children & the Young at Heart

1. Visit the [NASA Kids Do-It-Yourself page](#) for activities galore.
2. Check out the [Sky Events calendar at the U-Maine Emera Astronomy Center](#) and keep watching the night skies! Emera also offers online Virtual Astronomy Experiences, an online astronomy club with virtual star parties, and a variety of planetarium programs.
3. Comet Swift-Tuttle was named after the two people who discovered it. What would you name a comet?
4. Start a space journal, or make room for sky & star gazing notes in your current journal.

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