

OUTDOORS

CALL OF THE WILD

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Wild parsnip: A burning issue

BY MEADOW KOUFFELD-HANSEN
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Assistant Area Wildlife Manager

If you pay attention to roadside greenery, you may have observed a noticeable increase in the number of yellow flowers over the last few years in Koochiching County.

Wild parsnip, an invasive plant species, is certainly making a showing this year. Although the flowers may appear inviting from a distance, one should be cautious. In combination with sunlight, the sap of the wild parsnip can cause blistering burns if it makes contact with your skin. This chemical reaction is called phytophotodermatitis (a word meaning plant (phyto) light

(photo) skin inflammation (dermatitis)). Very often long-term darkening of the skin and scarring occurs after the burns heal.

In addition to the threat to human health, wild parsnip tends to out compete native plant species. Once established, wild parsnip spreads quickly and the seeds remain viable for up to four years in the soil. You can identify wild parsnip by its yellow flowers arranged in flat topped clusters and glossy green alternating leaves with serrated oval shaped leaflets. Young wild parsnip resembles parsley (they are in the same family). In addition, wild parsnip has a long white tap root that is edible. It is believed that wild parsnip, native to Europe and Asia, was

introduced as a cultivated food item in the Americas and has since escaped.

Recently, the Department of Natural Resources initiated a wild parsnip control project on the Littlefork River and Waldbillig Wildlife Management Areas. The plan is to mow infested areas over several years in hopes of removing the seed stalk of the monocarpic perennial (a plant that spends one or more years in rosette (non-flowering basal growth) stage, blooms under favorable conditions, and then dies) to thwart its spread. The DNR hopes to continue this effort over the next few years. It is expected that an observable decline in the number of flowering plants should occur around four years.

Similar efforts can be

made on privately owned land. Wild parsnip can be mowed when it is flowering (usually during the month of July) to set back seed production. If this is done for several consecutive years you should notice the number of plants on your property declining. If you have a minor infection or a small area you may consider cutting the plants tap root below the surface using a shovel or pulling the plants. The spot application of herbicide is another option. With diligence you may reclaim a parsnip free spread.

Remember to always wear protective gear including gloves, long sleeved shirts, pants and shoes that cover your skin when working with this noxious weed and avoid contact with the sap.

Look to the sky in August

BY DEANE MORRISON

University of Minnesota

August opens with the spectacle of a waning moon dropping past three planets over three mornings.

First up is Jupiter, a beacon above the eastern horizon. Look an hour before sunrise on the 3rd to see an old moon a little to the planet's upper right.

Next comes Mars; on the 4th, a thinner crescent appears to the Red Planet's lower right. And on the 5th, look half an hour before sunrise for a slip of a moon to Mercury's lower right. Mercury is quite low, forming a slightly crooked line with Mars and Jupiter. You'll need binoculars for this one.

This is a good year for the Perseid meteor shower, with prime viewing in the

predawn hours of the 11th through the 13th. Typically bright, Perseids fly at up to 36 miles per second and often leave persistent trails. The meteors will radiate from a point in the constellation Perseus, which will be well up in the northeast.

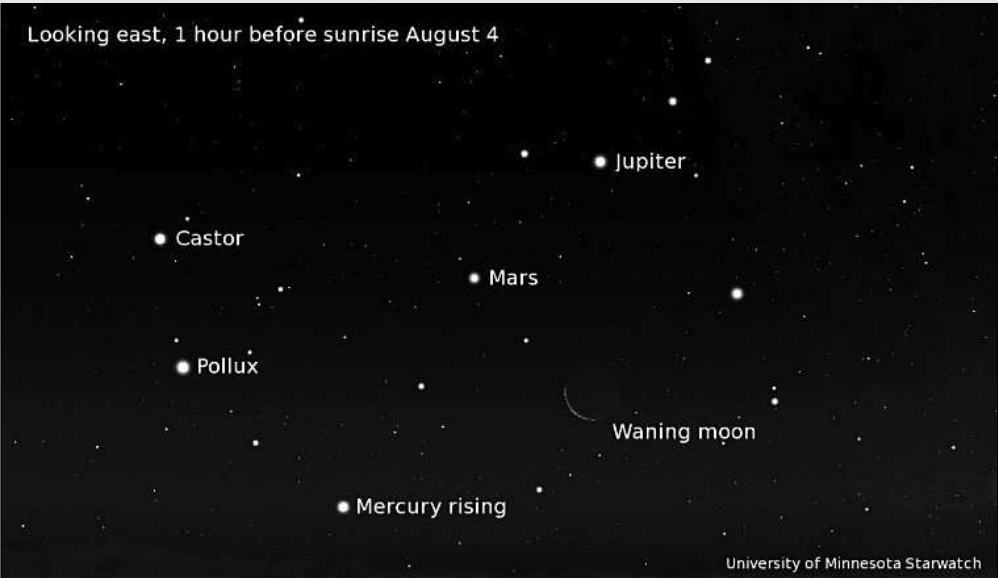
In the evening sky, Venus keeps blazing away, though it's rather close to the sunset horizon. A waxing crescent moon visits on the 9th, hanging below the planet to form a celestial semicolon in the sun's afterglow.

High in the south floats the Summer Triangle of bright stars: brilliant Vega, in Lyra, the lyre, in the northwest corner; Deneb, in Cygnus, the swan, east of Vega; and Altair, in Aquila, the eagle, at the southern vertex. Deneb, from the Arabic for "tail" (of the hen), is

also the brightest star in the grouping called the Northern Cross, which gives the swan its shape. As you gaze at Deneb, you're looking in the direction our solar system is traveling through the disk of the Milky Way galaxy.

August's full Sturgeon Moon — named for the large fish that is easily caught this time of year — rises gorgeously round on the 20th. In the Twin Cities, moonrise occurs at 7:39 p.m. and fullness at 8:45 p.m.; in more western and northern areas, moonrise comes even closer to the instant of perfect roundness. Some Algonquin tribes also called this moon the full Red Moon because the summer haze made it appear reddish as it rose, or the Green Corn moon.

If you're up an hour or two before dawn, try look-



The sky is active in the first part of August.

ing to the east to find the elusive zodiacal light—a faint, broad glow pointing up along the sun's path. This is the result of sunlight reflecting off grains of dust that extend far out into space in Earth's orbital plane. August and September are the best months for spotting it in the morning, and it can also be seen after sunset in

late winter. The summer apparition was dubbed the "false dawn" in the collection of poems called the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

The University of Minnesota offers public viewings of the night sky at its Duluth campus. For more information and viewing schedules, see:

- Duluth, Marshall W.

Alworth Planetarium: www.d.umn.edu/planet

- Check out the astronomy programs at the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum ExploraDome: www.bellmuseum.umn.edu/ForGroups/ExploraDome/index.htm
- Find U of M astronomers and links to the world of astronomy at <http://www.astro.umn.edu>.

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