



Lyrids Pulse in April

A sprinkle of late-night meteors arrives mid-month.

One of my favorite signs of spring where I live is the sound of water dripping from the roof while I'm out with the telescope. When night temperatures stay above freezing, the snow remaining on the roof continues to melt into the evening, making a pleasant drip-drip-drip as the stars come out.

Along with water droplets, birdsong, and the year's first leaves, spring also brings the ever-reliable Lyrid meteor shower. Although associated with Vega, the brightest star in the constellation Lyra, the celestial Lyre, the display's meteors actually hail from across the border in Hercules — a reminder of a time when constellation boundaries were more fluid than they are today.

Earth enters the Lyrid stream — the dusty spawn of Comet Thatcher (C/1861 G1) — around April 14th and exits at month's end. The shower is at its best during the early morning hours of the 22nd, when the radiant approaches the zenith. That's also close to the time of maximum, which is predicted to occur around 9:30 a.m. EDT.

Lyrid rates vary from an all-time maximum of 90 meteors per hour, to the more typical 15 to 20 per hour. Although the Northern Hemisphere is favored, southern observers can also enjoy the display though at reduced rates due to the radiant's lower altitude. Fortunately, the Moon won't be a serious problem this year. It rises as

▲ Yuri Beletsky captured this composite image of the 2017 Lyrid meteor shower from Chile's Atacama Desert. Multiple Lyrids point back to the radiant southwest of the bright star Vega (below center), while the foreground is dominated by the dome of the 1.3-meter Optical Gravitational Lensing Experiment Telescope, located at Las Campanas Observatory.

a 36%-illuminated waning crescent at around 3:30 a.m. local daylight time, roughly an hour before the start of morning astronomical twilight for observers at mid-northern latitudes.

Lyrid viewing is easy. Simply dress warmly and set up a reclining chair where you're least troubled by neighborhood lights — the direction you face doesn't matter since the meteors can flash anywhere in the sky. You can start

as early as 9:30 p.m. on the evening of the 21st, but you'll have more success when the radiant stands higher later that night and into the predawn hours of the 22nd. You'll undoubtedly see an occasional sporadic (random) meteor, but Lyrids stand apart because their paths can be traced back to Vega.

Need more incentive? Let's add a couple of planets to the deal. Stay up to dawn and welcome Venus and Saturn, low in the southeastern sky and less than 5° apart. If you have a telescope, you can be among the first to glimpse the south face of Saturn's razor-thin rings tipped just 1.6° . The last time anyone got a gander at this side of the rings from Earth was back in 2009, after that year's ring-plane crossing.***

