Desperately Seeking Saturn

I am a "summer person." Despite having lived in New England for 30+ years, I've never relished the bracing cold of winter the way the crazy locals do. And when everyone else is oohing and aahing over autumn's vibrant colors, deep down inside I'm a little depressed.

This past November I had another reason to be out of sorts: there were no bright planets in the evening sky. Jupiter, which had dominated the night all summer long, had finally plunged out of sight in the west. Saturn and Mars were long gone as well, and Venus hadn't yet climbed high enough above the horizon to be picked out in the twilight glow.

NIGHT SKY: J. KELLY BEATTY

After a quick check, I realized that we've had at least one bright planet gracing the evening sky nonstop for more than two years (since late 2004). In all that time, I've always been able to grab a quick view of Jupiter and its moons before supper, show off Saturn's magnificent rings at a star party, or simply gaze up at ruddy Mars and ponder the small army of spacecraft that are studying its surface.

Planets are something of a priority with me. I studied them a lot in college (I wanted to become a planetary scientist), and for more than three decades I've reported on the latest solar-system discoveries in the pages of *Sky & Telescope* and elsewhere. A whole corner of my office is overrun with globes of Mercury, Venus, Mars, and even the four giant satellites of Jupiter.

But beyond my personal fascination with these worlds, I think planet-watching is an essential first step for any stargazer. After all, they're usually bright enough to burn through even the harshest light pollution. Their movement against the starry background dramatically illustrates the intricate clockwork of our solar system. And they're easy, satisfying targets to look at through a telescope.

So now you can appreciate why I've gotten a little moody as 2006 draws to a close and we begin a new year. But that won't last long. Venus is climbing a little higher night by night — any day I should be able to spot it low in the west. And by late January my old friend Saturn will rise among the tapestry of winter stars over in the east soon after sunset. I can't wait!

Kelly Beatty

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