

Astronomy Delight!

“Think Jupiter”

by Ed Forrest and Susan Forrest

Most people know that the planet Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system and frequently can easily be seen in the night sky throughout the year. It is the second brightest planet after Venus. Some people have had the opportunity to view Jupiter through binoculars or a telescope, and have gazed in awe at its magnificent display of changing beauty. Through the smallest of telescopes or binoculars observers can see with ease a variety of

colorful cloud belts, the famous red spot hurricane that is several times the size of earth and has been visible since the days of Galileo, and watch the nightly changing positions of four of its major moons as they orbit this marvelous planet. As it silently traverses the night sky, Jupiter has truly been a star gazers delight since ancient times.

Yet most people take this solar system behemoth for granted and pay it no mind. The fact that it orbits the sun at an average distance of almost 483,780,000 miles, has three thin rings (much less spectacular than Saturn's) that can only be observed through large observatory instruments, or its diameter of 88,846 miles is almost 11 times that of earth's

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and over 1,000 earths could fit inside it, are but trivial facts when it comes to our busy daily lives. Of course, those who study Jupiter are fascinated that this gas giant, whose layers of thick atmospheres of Hydrogen, Helium, and smaller amounts of lethal gasses as methane, ammonia, phosphine, acetylene, ethane, germanium, carbon monoxide, and trace amounts of even water, may surround a core of such mysterious and exotic materials as metallic Hydrogen. (Can you imagine what metallic hydrogen looks or even feels like? Perhaps it would be similar to a Star-Trek type decoration that you might find in a party balloon on the starship Enterprise.)

Yes, fascination is the watch word for those intellectual and scientific nerds, techno geeks, and astronomy buffs, when it comes to the planet Jupiter. Discussions of cloud top temperatures of minus 290 degrees Fahrenheit, the impact on satellite communications that result from the planet possessing the largest magnetosphere of any planet in the solar system, or even chat of Jupiter's rotation rate of a little less than 10 hours can provide hours, if not days, of interesting and captivating discussion among those who enjoy scientific discourse. It's a pity that poor ole Jupiter has such a small number of fans when you consider few, if any people, realize just how important this planet really is. Consider this exhilarating possibility for example, and perhaps you might become more interested in our solar systems silent sentry.

Imagine waking up in the morning and

the last thing you see or feel is a bright light in the sky just prior to you being crushed by a thousand mile per hour compressing atmosphere whose temperature is approaching multiple thou-



Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 was intercepted by Jupiter in 1994.

sands of degrees, an instant before you are vaporized in an impact that is equivalent to the force of the entire worlds nuclear arsenal exploding at once. If it wasn't for that silent sentry Jupiter there is no doubt it would have happened already, or the odds of it happening in the future will be greatly increased.

A large Jupiter sized planet is vital for the ability for life to evolve in a solar system, much less be sustainable long enough to acquire intelligence. Large, massive, planets possess strong gravity fields and are the great protectors of smaller solar system planets such as the earth. Jupiter has often intercepted objects, some that may have been destined to travel into the inner solar system and impact our planet, resulting in the total annihilation of any emerging or existing life forms. Comets originating either from within our solar system or beyond, moderate sized meteoroids, and even rogue asteroids (many

of Jupiter's 62 moons are believed to be captured asteroids) that were perturbed out of their orbits in some of the several asteroid belts contained within our solar system, are all fair game to this cosmic catcher.

The famous comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 was intercepted by Jupiter in 1994 and broke into 21 pieces, ranging in size from a small .3 of a mile, to approximately 4 miles in diameter. Each fragment smashed into Jupiter with the force of multiple megaton atomic bombs. Any one of these pieces hitting the earth would result in devastation beyond belief, as some of the resulting impact plume clouds observed on Jupiter were several times larger than the earth itself and were visible for weeks.

Earth-killer impacts would be an understatement.

So should we here on earth become obsessed with this ongoing threat? No, but we should be aware and appreciate the fact that we have a planetary protector out there who is forever on guard to keep us all safe. Silently and steadily revolving around the sun every 12 years, Jupiter is truly an army of one in our solar system, constantly on guard, always at the ready to protect us, and willing to give it's all to keep us safe. So when night falls drag out that scope when Jupiter is visible in the night sky and give this vitally important planet a chance to amaze you with its beauty and size. Become a star gazer, a fan of Jupiter, a lover of the starlit night sky, and remember we're here because Jupiter is there, always standing guard.

Astronomy Delight! Headquartered in Hyde Park, N.Y. welcomes your questions and comments regarding this column and offers day and night after-school enrichment programs, classroom events, scouts, camps, group lectures, individual astronomy programs, and observation courses for families, parents, and children of all ages throughout the country and Tri-state NY area. FRANCHISE INQUIRY ARE WELCOME
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