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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Brian Mitchell

The planet Mars will not be passing close to the Earth in 2006. It will not be, “next to the moon”, the brightest object in the night sky. And it will certainly not look “to the naked eye...as large as the full moon.”

Yet that is the story in a dramatic email message that’s making the rounds. The misinformation seems to have been repeated annually since 2003 on a certain website, and unsuspecting people are forwarding this story to friends and relatives. The news raises many questions and likely some excitement, but in 2006 it’s not going to happen. Here’s why.

This month, from our point of view on Earth, Mars is far beyond the sun, about 390,000,000 kilometres away. Since Mars is a relatively small planet (about half the diameter of Earth), it appears very small in the night sky. Its surface is not highly reflective. Mars would appear only slightly brighter than the North Star if the two were placed side by side, but since Mars is close in line with the sun now and sets well before dark, it will be very much in that star’s glare. Don’t go looking for Mars this month.

Viewing Mars was different in August of 2003. In that year the Earth “caught up to” Mars in their respective orbits. Both were on the same side of the sun, and the distance between the two was only 55,758,006 kilometres (give or take 6 kilometres). Much Closer! Besides, Mars was rising at 10:00 PM in a dark sky. It shone brightly, almost like an aircraft with its lights on high beam (but never as bright

as Venus). It appeared much larger than it does today, though still not as large as the full moon. If the full moon were a soccer ball, the Mars might be a loonie. This month, if we could see Mars at all, it would appear the size of a small pinhead.

Fortunately, there are other things to observe this September. You might see Mercury, which sets about 30-40 minutes after the sun on September 24. Look near the horizon just south of west. Binoculars might be helpful in locating the planet. (WARNING: Never look at or near the sun with binoculars. Permanent blindness could result.)

On the brighter side, Venus will be plainly visible near the eastern horizon at dawn in early September. On the 21st look for a very thin crescent moon (one day before new) right next to Venus. Again, binoculars might be useful, not to see Venus but to see the fine edge of the moon.

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Natural Mysteries

Last month’s mystery was: What is that large white stain on the cliff face just west of Matthews Point? The stain is seabird “whitewash”, caused by the buildup of liquid defecations over the years. The cliff face at Matthews Point is a favourite perch for Pelagic Cormorants, our smallest cormorant species. If you look carefully from the ferry, you can sometimes see a dozen or more of these slender black birds clinging to the cliff, especially in the fall months. The cormorants only roost here, but they nest on ledges of the large cliff at the Trincomali Nature Sanctuary on the west side of the island.

Even closer examination of the Matthews Point cliff face will reveal much smaller

whitewash spots at several other locations. These spots are found downslope from small crevices in which Pigeon Guillemots nest during the spring and summer. Guillemots are small black seabirds with white wing patches and red legs which can often be seen swimming or flying either singly or in pairs near the cliff.

This month's Natural Mystery: Some of the alders at Laughlin Lake have bright cyan fuzzy felt-like patches on the underside of the leaves. What's going on?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. (galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com)