



Media Contact: Molly O'Connell  
312.322.0524  
moconnell@adlernet.org

## **PERSEID METEOR SHOWER ON AUGUST 11-12 WILL BE THE MOST VIBRANT DISPLAY IN YEARS**

CHICAGO, IL— Due to the waning crescent moon and the partial split of the Comet Swift-Tuttle, the annual Perseid meteor shower currently lighting up the night sky will provide the most vibrant display in years. On the night of August 11, 2004, until the early morning hours of August 12, sky watchers may see up to 100 meteors per hour as the Earth passes through the dust trail of Comet Swift-Tuttle.

Comet Swift-Tuttle, which was discovered independently in 1862 by the two Americans Lewis Swift and Horace Tuttle, is a giant iceberg comprised of particles of ice, rock and dust. Dust particles the size of sand are slowly eroding away from the comet every time it approaches the sun, leaving a debris trail that the Earth's orbit intersects once each year. The particles, known as meteoroids, create the meteor shower when they collide with the Earth's atmosphere and burn up, causing the air to glow in their wake and creating fiery streaks across the sky.

"Every orbit, when Comet Swift-Tuttle nears the Sun, it slowly disintegrates and releases swarms of dust particles," said Larry Ciupik, Adler Astronomer. "Recently, the Cassini space probe discovered dust in Saturn's rings which may have been originally embedded in frozen comets much like Comet Swift-Tuttle."

The best time to view the meteors will be in the early morning hours of August 12 when the shower peaks. Because the thin crescent moon will not rise until after approximately 2 a.m., the skies will be dark and visibility

increased. This year, we may experience an extra surge of meteors on August 11 as the Earth passes through a new stream of dust released by the comet. This particular trail of dust detached from the comet during the Civil War.

The best way to view the Perseids is to get away from city lights on the night of the 11<sup>th</sup> and look northeast until the early morning hours of August 12. (Note: If viewing outdoors, be sure to wear proper insect repellent.)

As for the origin of the name, we have the imagination of the ancient Greeks to thank. The particles appear to radiate from the constellation Perseus. Perseus was the Greek hero of mythology who slew Medusa and rescued the maiden Andromeda from the jaws of the sea monster Cetus.

The Greeks immortalized this tale in the night skies in the constellations Perseus, Andromeda, and Cetus, which nestle closely together in the visible sky and can be seen from North America in August by looking northeast.

To learn more about the constellations or Saturn's rings, see *Secrets of Saturn* now playing at the Adler Planetarium in the historic Sky Theater.

### **Adler Planetarium & Astronomy Museum**

1300 South Lake Shore Drive

Chicago, IL 60605

312.922.STAR (7827)

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