The Night Sky

If we lived near the ocean, we could look forward to unusually high tides around the 19th when the full moon will be the closest it will be until 2016. But since East Tennessee is landlocked, we'll have to be content watching Earth's satellite rise around 8 p.m.

A day later, the sun will be directly over the equator at 7:21 p.m., marking the vernal equinox and the beginning of spring as the sun starts its northward journey.

From the 13th through 16th, the bright planet Jupiter will be very near the planet Mercury low in the western sky 40 minutes after sunset. Jupiter is on its way behind the sun, while Mercury is coming out from behind the sun. At the beginning of the month, Saturn will rise in the eastern sky more than two hours after sunset, but will rise at sunset by month's end.
On the 19th, Saturn will be to the upper left of the full moon.

By the way, March's full moon has many names including the Worm Moon, the Crow Moon, the Crust Moon, the Sap Moon and the Lenten Moon. That last name, Lenten, comes from its connection to the Christian season of Lent and its role in determining the date of Easter, which falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring.

In the morning sky, Venus will be very bright, low in the east-southeast sky just before dawn. Venus and Neptune pass very close to each other the morning of the 27th, though Neptune is too faint to be seen without a telescope. Both Mars and Uranus will be lost in the glare of the sun this month.

The next free public astronomy open house at the ETSU Powell Observatory will be on April 9 from 8 to 10 p.m. This will be the last astronomy open house until fall. At these open houses, the public can view objects in the sky through telescopes and hear talks by faculty of the Physics and Astronomy Department. Note that the open houses are cancelled if the sky is cloudy.

The March Night Sky was written by Dr. Donald G. Luttermoser, Chair, Department of Physics and Astronomy. He can be reached at lutter@etsu.edu. Astronomy-related information for the public, including a link to the ETSU astronomy open houses, can be found at http://www.etsu.edu/physics/astronomy.htm.