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DURHAM, N.H. -- With the red planet closer to Earth than it has been in nearly 60,000 years, the University of New Hampshire Observatory on the Durham campus will hold a Mars viewing session Saturday, Aug. 23, 2003, from 9 to 11 p.m. The public is invited and admission is free.

At its closest pass on Aug. 27, at 5:52 a.m., Mars will be less than 34.65 million miles away. While that might not seem "close," consider the fact that just six months ago Mars was five times further away from Earth. The last time we had a close encounter of the Mars kind, Neanderthals roamed the Earth. That was in the year 57,617 B.C., and Mars was actually 25,000 miles nearer to Earth than it will be this year. It will be another 284 years, on Aug. 28, 2287, when Mars once again comes into the neighborhood.

"We’ll be able to see surface features and the south polar cap of the red planet," says John Gianforte of the Blue Sky Observatory. "Mars will be brighter and larger in a telescope than it has in many, many years."

Gianforte notes that while the focus will be mainly on Mars, "Depending on how many people we have for our public session, we'll probably take a look at some other favorites like, M13, M57 (the Ring Nebula), M27 (the Dumbell Nebula) and M31 (the Andromeda Galaxy)."

While such alphanumerically designated celestial objects may not fire the imagination the way Mars does, Gianforte describes M13, for example, as "a great globular cluster in Hercules - a huge collection of more than 500,000 stars in spherical shape about 100 light-years across and some 28,000 light-years away." The university's 14-inch telescope will be able to resolve individual stars in this stunning cluster.
For the Aug. 23 event, Gianforte adds, "Folks are encouraged to bring their astronomical questions. When we have between 10 to 15 participants we get some pretty interesting conversations going. All kinds of astronomical questions will be fielded, such as how far away is a given object or how did certain objects form? The sky’s the limit."

The UNH observatory (a silo shaped building) is located near the tree line in the soccer field on the west side of the UNH campus field adjacent to the Field House and tennis courts on Main Street (Old Route 4). Parking for the public sessions is at the tennis courts and at Moils House, which is located directly across the street from the observatory.

Bring binocular, insect repellent, and dress appropriately.

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