

Get up early to witness a cosmic show

Richard Macey

If the weather behaves, Sydney may be treated to a cosmic fireworks show tonight and early tomorrow. Overnight the Earth will run into a stream of dust that circles the inner solar system, triggering the annual Geminid meteor shower.

Nick Lomb, astronomer at the Powerhouse Museum's Sydney Observatory, said the meteor shower was the better of two visible each year from Australia.

The meteors should be visible from about 11 tonight until about 4.30 tomorrow morning, with the best display likely to be between about 2am and 4am. People wanting to spot the meteors should stand away from lights and look north.

Dr Lomb said that under a dark sky, away from the city, it might be possible to see one meteor every couple of minutes, while from Sydney's suburbs the rate may be closer to one every five minutes.

But, he warned, from the light polluted inner city "it could be difficult" to see any at all.

Dr Lomb expects the performance to be reasonably good, if the clouds stay away.

Dr Lomb said meteor showers were normally associated with the Earth running into streams of dust and debris that trail behind comets as their icy surfaces boil away as they approach the sun. However, the Geminid shower has been traced to an asteroid, dubbed 3200 Phaethon, discovered in 1983 by an astronomy satellite called IRAS.

The asteroid orbits the sun once every 1.4 years.

Dr Lomb said it was a mystery why an asteroid that "looks like a piece of rock" should be leaving a dust trail in its wake.

He said the meteor shower was certainly worth getting out of bed to watch.

"It's like a free fireworks show in the sky," he said.

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