

April Shower Power

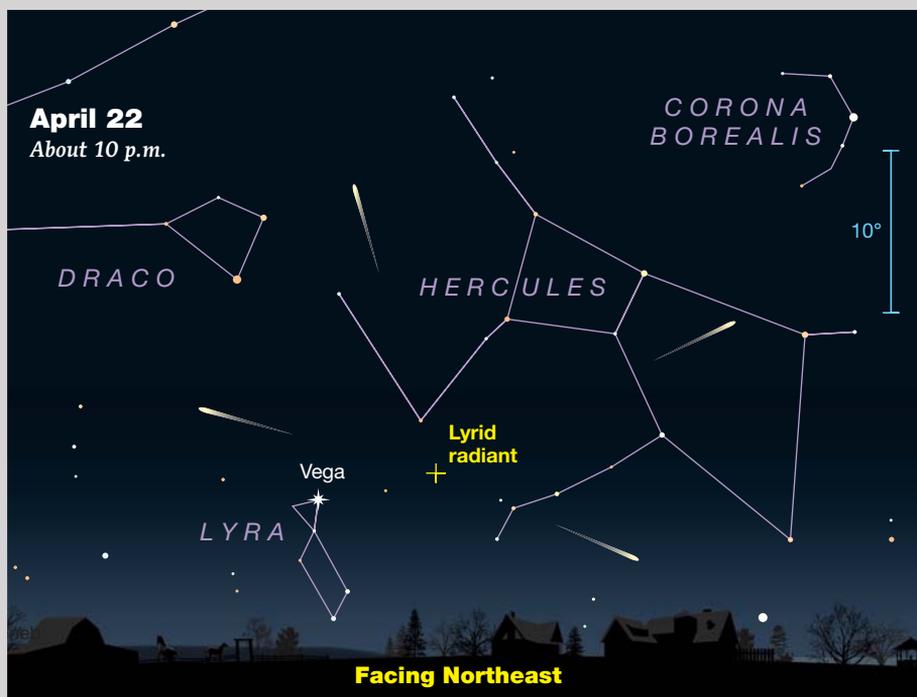
AS WINTER SNOW FLURRIES give way to spring rains, the annual Lyrid meteor shower spatters Earth's atmosphere with up to 20 meteors per hour on the peak night of April 21–22. This year, the event unfolds under ideal conditions in a moonless sky. While the Lyrids are considered a minor shower, the display is known for curveballs, like the 1982 outburst when American observers briefly recorded around 100 meteors per hour, or in 1945 when the same number was witnessed over Japan. In his book *Meteor Showers and Their Parent Comets*, meteor expert Peter Jenniskens predicts possible repeat Lyrid flare-ups in 2040 and 2041.

Each Lyrid that streaks across the sky is a bit of dust or rock shed by Comet Thatcher (C/1861 G1), which orbits the Sun every 415 years. During April, Earth plows headlong through the comet's debris trail. As the cometary shards slam into our planet's atmosphere at more than 165,000 km/h, they leave behind glowing trails of ionized air, still referred to as "shooting stars."

Meteor showers get their names based on where they appear to radiate from in the sky. That being the case, the Lyrids should really be called the Hercu-lids because the shower radiant lies 8° west-southwest of Vega, just inside the eastern border of Hercules. Before constellation boundaries were standardized in 1930, the display was associated with Vega, in Lyra. Of course, it still is even if the radiant has been "relocated."

According to the American Meteor Society, the Lyrids produce a good show for three nights centered on the date of the peak. You might spy a few meteors during evening hours when Vega shines low in the northeastern sky, but your best bet will be to rise early on the morning of the 22nd when the shower peaks and the radiant stands near the zenith before dawn.

As you watch sparks fly, consider that you're only the most recent in a long line of skywatchers to marvel at



▲ The radiant for the Lyrid meteor shower is indicated in the diagram above. Although you can begin your meteor watch late in the evening of April 21st, the display will be at its best during the pre-dawn hours of the 22nd.

this spring apparition. Observations of the Lyrids date back to 687 BC, making the display one of the oldest recorded meteor showers.

Spring mornings can often be quite chilly, so be sure bundle up well. Break

out the lawn chair, recline, and enjoy the show. Given the radiant's high pre-dawn position, it doesn't really matter which direction you face — you'll likely see a good mix of Lyrids and sporadics. Worth enduring the spring chill for!