Mon, Aug 23, 2010  VOYAGER 2 AT NEPTUNE
The robot spacecraft Voyager 2 was launched 33 years ago, on August 20th, 1977, and it’s still working. After passing the planet Jupiter in 1979, Saturn in 1981 and Uranus in 1986, it reached Neptune on August 23rd, 1989, flying to within 3,000 miles of that distant world. It saw Neptune’s stormy atmosphere, with thousand-mile-an-hour winds, plus an earth-sized hurricane, the Great Dark Spot. And it found nitrogen ice geysers on Neptune’s moon Triton, where the temperature plunges to 400 below.
At its current distance from earth, nearly nine billion miles (that’s almost three times farther out than Pluto,) a radio signal sent from here at the speed of light takes about 13 hours to reach Voyager 2. Voyagers 1 and 2 have discovered a magnetic field out there that appears to bind together a thin interstellar cloud of material. There, at the boundary between the solar wind and the interstellar winds from other stars, discoveries are being made right now.

Tue, Aug 24, 2010  AUGUST FULL MOON IN AQUARIUS
The moon is full tonight, and it rises out of the east at sunset, in the constellation Aquarius the Water Carrier. Aquarius is one of the fainter, more obscure constellations of the zodiac. Some myths say Aquarius represents the hero Hercules, who in order to quickly clean out the filth left by the horses of King Augeus, diverted the course of two rivers and flooded the Augean stables. O-kay.
The Sioux Indians called this full moon, the Moon When the Geese Shed Their Feathers. The Ottawa tribes knew it as the Sturgeon Moon, named for the misty moonbow made by that fish when it leaps from the stream. The Ponca called it the Corn in is in the Silk Moon, meaning it's a good time to harvest the corn; other tribes had similar names, such as the Big Ripening Moon of the Creek Indians or the even more simply named Corn Moon of the Zuni. To the Cherokee, though, this was the Drying Up Moon, appropriate after a long hot spell of summer weather.

Wed, Aug 25, 2010  DEPARTMENT STORE SCOPES
It is very easy to buy a telescope that doesn't work, or that resists your attempts to operate it. When you first see it in the store, it looks terrific. But such telescopes are usually difficult to use, and after you've struggled with them to find the moon, a planet or a bright star, you give up and put it away, or wait until your next yard sale. The first problem with these 'scopes is that the tripod they come on is usually not very sturdy, and the instrument won't stay steady, or can't be properly held on target; the second problem is, the eyepieces are so small it's hard to look through them.
If you've got a troublesome telescope like this, my best advice is to use just the eyepiece that gives the LOWEST magnification - between 30 and 70 power, and no more. Firm up the mount by replacing the cheap aluminum nuts and bolts with ones of better quality. Also, line up the finder scope with the view through the main tube's eyepiece, or you'll have a hard time finding things up there.

Thu, Aug 26, 2010  MOON, JUPITER AND URANUS IN PISCES
The moon rises tonight in the late evening, and is well placed for viewing in the east by midnight. Tonight it is nearby the planet Jupiter, which appears as a bright star just below and to the right of the moon. There’s another planet between the two, but you won’t be able to see it without a telescope: it’s Uranus, and it’s slightly above and to the right of Jupiter. All of these objects can be found within the borders of the constellation Pisces – in the western fish, and just beneath the wings of Pegasus the Flying Horse.
A small telescope aimed at the moon can show you the dark basaltic plains and the rugged cratered highlands of the moon, and it can also show you the planet Jupiter as a small round object with two stripes, or bands, across its disc, plus as many as four tiny, star-like objects spread out on either side of the planet – its four largest moons: Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto.

Fri, Aug 27, 2010  THE CRAB NEBULA
On the night of August 28th in the year 1758, the Crab Nebula was discovered with a telescope. Its importance was not immediately recognized: the nebula's discoverer, Charles Messier of France, thought at first that it was a comet, which when seen far out in space, resembles a small fuzzy splotch of light. But unlike comets, this fuzzy object didn't move against the starry background. Hour after hour, night after night, the thing refused to budge.
Disappointed in his failure to find a new comet, Messier catalogued this object as Messier #1, or M-1, and from then on, whenever he saw it, he quickly moved on to more promising candidates. But when bigger and better telescopes were invented, other astronomers found that M-1, the Crab Nebula, is more impressive than any comet: it is the exploded remains of a star that went supernova. Tonight M-1 can be found, with a telescope, low in the east a little after 2 AM, behind the forward horn tip of Taurus the Bull.