

Conservation Corner

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“The moon is the Rosetta Stone by which we understand the rest of the solar system.”

Noah Petro, NASA Scientist

Last week the moon was extra easy and exciting to read and decipher. I'm sure many of you watched the moon approach the perigee or closest point of its orbit during its full moon phase on November 14. If not, don't worry, there's one more supermoon coming up in 2016 on December 14 – mark your calendars now. Last week's supermoon was the biggest and brightest since 1948 – not quite as long since the Cubs last World Series appearance but close!

Last fall we looked in wonder at the blood moon, which happens occasionally when a supermoon coincides with a total lunar eclipse. This fall treated us to a supermoon, a term coined by astrologer Richard Nolle in 1979 and which simply refers to the closest full moon each year. Scientists refer to the event as a perigee-syzygy of the Earth-Moon-Sun system or perigee full/new moon. The opposite, apogee-syzygy, occurs when the moon is farthest away from Earth and is called a micromoon. All these episodes arise from the moon's elliptical orbit that brings the moon anywhere from 222,000 to 252,000 miles from Earth. As a result, last week's moon appeared 13% bigger and 30% brighter in the night sky.

The moon has long been admired, worshipped, and studied by humans. Recently I've been working with stone ground artifacts, and I can't help but wonder what those first Iowans must have thought as a supermoon appeared over the horizon. I remember experiencing mixed feelings myself as I watched Neil Armstrong take his “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” onto the lunar surface of Tranquility Base.

Only 12 men have walked on the lunar surface since that summer of 1969, but scientists continue to study and map the moon via robots and satellites. NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, for example, has been gathering intel since 2009. Another example is ANSMET, a joint effort by NASA, the National Science Foundation, and the Smithsonian Institution, that has been searching for meteorites on Antarctica since 1976.

To date 23,000 meteorites have been found on Antarctica, each one a fascinating chapter in the saga of our solar system. The cold desert climate preserves them, ice sheets pile them up in glacial marines, and every summer teams of scientists collect, research, and curate these story nuggets of asteroids, Mars, and the moon.

Meanwhile, back on Planet Earth, Conservation invites everyone to join us this coming Saturday, Nov. 26, for the Pocahontas Art Walk. We'll be hosting a Make & Take Workshop at the ISU Extension Office on Main Street from 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Everyone is welcome to stop by and create a stained glass wind chime or rock mosaic. We can't promise you the moon or meteorites, but we can promise a day filled with color, fun, and friendship. Hope to see you on the walk!

