Feeding us hype again?

by Steve Tonner

Well, they did it again.

Scientists have predicted that Shoemaker-Levy 9, a string of broken-up comet fragments, will impact with the planet Jupiter in late July 1994. When this happens, it will release a huge display in the form of ripple-like disruptions in the gaseous planet's atmosphere and holes the size of Quebec in its upper layer, which will allow astronomers to see the insides of the structure for the first time.

They are optimistic that even though the zone of impact will be on the far side of the planet when the comet hits, that Jupiter's rotation will carry it into view for telescopes on Earth and in orbit to see. In addition, the Galileo space probe should be able to see the impact as it happens.

Scientists are predicting the force of the impact to be roughly equal to the force released when an asteroid impacted with Earth millions of years ago, the currently accepted theory of the extinction of the dinosaurs. When that impact occurred, it is believed to have blown dust clouds into the atmosphere that blocked all light and heat for years. It is hoped if an equally immense impact occurs on Jupiter, that we will get a view of the planet's inner workings. This of course, depends on the impact being a large, powerful one.

Scientists grossly overplayed the latest appearance of Halley's Comet

And that's where we run into a little snag. Remember the meteor shower that was predicted for earlier this summer? They said we could look up in the sky and see literally thousands of meteors streaking across the sky every minute. Of course, it didn't happen, and that's not all. Scientists also grossly overplayed the latest reappearance of Halley's comet back in 1986. At the time, people were whipped into a frenzy by predictions of a huge display in the night sky, dominating the view for weeks. Well, that never happened either. In fact, the only fiery trails to be seen were those behind everyone who ran out to buy telescopes for this event, and even through those, Halley's was unimpressive.

So why is it that scientists continually tell us that the latest neato thing to occur in the heavens is going to be the next best thing to a fireworks display, when in fact they are little better than listening to paint dry?

Perhaps they're trying to get others interested in the events out in the solar system and elsewhere, trying to inspire people to look up and see the wonder of the universe. If they wanted to do that, would making huge promises that are unlikely to come true be smart? For the answer to that one, just look at how well the Natural Law party did. Such unfulfilled promises only further dissolution people who expect to be able to see something special in the night sky.

So, why did they do it? Maybe it's something as simple as the undying quest for funding. Everyone knows that the budgets for astronomical research are gradually shrinking everywhere. NASA just killed its SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Life) project, and the space station is shrinking in size and capabilities as its budget does. Perhaps these announcements are a way of getting attention?

One thing is for sure: if that's all it is, the scientific community should find a better way to get the public attention than saying this is going to be like the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger movie (remember that one?).

POINTLESS PONDERABLES

Well, we got a lot of response about last week's question, not to mention some threats that if we didn't reveal the solution, physical harm would come to us. This is a sign that it was a good question. And here's the answer:

The problem with the question is that it tricks you into adding together two numbers that you really shouldn't. The $27 the three people spent should not be added to the $2 the bellhop has, rather the $25 the innkeeper has should be added to it making a total of $27. The same as the three people spent. Then we add the three dollar refund they got, and the total is thirty dollars.

And here's this week's question, guaranteed to keep you up at night. You are on a train travelling at 50 kph, which is heading down a very long, straight stretch of track. On the radio you hear that a forest fire is sweeping behind you carried by a 70 kph wind. The train is already at it's maximum speed and the track is not going to curve out of the way in the next three and a half hours before the fire will reach the train. There is a tanker car being carried by the train containing petroleum which will explode when the fire reaches it. The resulting explosion will kill everyone on board. The petroleum car cannot be cut loose from the rest of the train. If you stop the train and get off, you will still be caught in the blast no matter how fast you run. What can you do to avoid being consumed by the fire? Answer next week.