The days now get shorter, the nights longer, the air sports a bit of a chill, and we have the stars of autumn above the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. Unlike summer or winter, fall is devoid of many bright stars, though there are still wonderful sights to see.

The main constellation of autumn is Pegasus, our flying horse, which sits in the sky as a large square of four stars. If you catch the square rising or setting, it will appear as a diamond. At roughly 10pm in mid-season, it is situated due south and not quite straight up in our fall sky. Some see the square as a baseball diamond with home plate being the star at the upper right. If you can imagine that, think about throwing a ball from third base over the first baseman’s head. Follow this line towards the Andromeda Galaxy and the stars of the constellation Andromeda. The galaxy will appear as a faint fuzzy spot to the unaided eye and an elongated cotton ball with binoculars. You’re seeing the closest large galaxy to our own Milky Way. Think about this – the light your seeing from those 200 billion or so stars took over two million years to reach your eyes!!

Above the Andromeda Galaxy (to the north) is a W-shaped constellation. This is Cassiopeia, our celestial queen. If you follow the two western-most stars of the square southward, you’ll find a solitary star. The star Fomalhaut is the brightest Pisces Austrinus, the southern fish. It comes in at number 18 on the bright star list.

To the west, we have the stars of summer and you should still see the summer triangle in the early evening sky. The three bright stars, Vega, Deneb, and Altair are your guide to the Milky Way, which runs through the triangle, from nearly overhead down to the southwestern horizon.

In the east, the brilliant stars of winter are beginning to rise. The harbinger of winter has to be the Pleiades star cluster or “Seven Sisters.” Look east-northeast and see how many of the seven you can find. Binoculars will show you maybe a dozen stars. Be sure to look for their hot blue color. And if you like star clusters, look between Cassiopeia and the constellation Perseus for two star clusters next to each other. Known merely as “The Double Cluster,” it’s practically invisible from town, but you can probably see it with just your eyes, high in the northeast, and it’s easy to see in binoculars.

If you look early in the evening, both Jupiter and Saturn may still be visible in the southwest, with Jupiter being much brighter than Saturn. The pair set at about midnight at the beginning of October and near 8pm towards the end of November. Try catching Jupiter right after sunset and see how many moons you can see in binoculars.

If the planets Jupiter and Saturn have set in the southwest already, the “show planet” of the fall will be the planet Mars. Every 26 months, our Earth catches up with Mars in its faster orbit. Mars is nearest Earth on October 6 at 38.6 million miles, meaning it will appear as bright as you’ll see it this year and also very large through a telescope. Might you see some surface features on the “red planet?” This is as close as Mars has been since 2018 and it won’t be this close again until 2035! Look for Mars a bit below and left of the square of Pegasus. It should be easy to find as it is brighter than any of the square stars and have a distinct reddish hue.
For those of you camping into the morning hours, be sure to look for Venus in the eastern sky, rising roughly three hours before sunrise. Venus appears to pass very near the bright star Regulus on the morning of October 3 and it sits just to the left of the bluish star Spica on the morning of November 17. Mercury joins Venus in the morning sky for the first two weeks of November. Look for it below and slightly left of Venus in the east.

Two meteor showers will appear under favorable skies this fall. The Orionids peak around October 21-22 when the Moon is a waxing crescent. Even more potent are the December Geminids. They peak on the morning of December 14 when the Moon is new and out of the sky. Though the campground is closed during this time, you can still take advantage of this beautiful dark sky site!