

The Dawning of the Supermoons By Lauren Likkel

When I was a kid, we didn't have Supermoons. The name hadn't been invented yet. A Supermoon is a full moon that is slightly larger and brighter than usual. We did have bigger and brighter moons when I was young – that happens when the full moon is a little closer to Earth. They were called “full moon near perigee”, and no one was interested. Especially since no one knew that “perigee” means “closest to Earth in its orbit”. It helps to know that the moon's orbit around the Earth has an oval shape, so sometimes it is closer to us. See, you are getting bored already and I haven't even explained that the moon is “full” when it is on the opposite side of the Earth from the sun, when we see the entire moon's lighted face. Imagine our excitement in my youth when we were told that “It will be a full moon at perigee, bigger and brighter than average”. Right, we didn't get excited. But we would have been excited if they had said “It will be a Supermoon!”. We would have easily understood exactly why it is bright: because it is a Supermoon. Now that Supermoons have been invented, I am much more interested in looking at a full moon.

It is also possible to have a Blood Moon Supermoon. A Blood Moon is a total lunar eclipse – the Moon passing directly through Earth's darkest shadow. Come to think of it, we never had “Blood Moons” when I was a kid. We just had “total lunar eclipses during which reddish sunlight refracting through Earth's atmosphere illuminates the moon”. The moon has better publicity now and has become more popular.

There are two Supermoons this month! Maybe you saw the bright Supermoon on August 3rd, 2023. The second one will occur August 30. It is so rare to squeeze TWO full moons into one month that the second full moon has a nickname: “blue moon”, as in “once in a blue moon”. So on August 30 we will have a Blue-Supermoon. A “blue moon” only occurs once every 2 or 3 years, but for the next BLUE-SUPERMOON we'll have to wait 9 years. About one in four moons is designated a Supermoon and they are about 14% brighter than average. When you see a Supermoon, it seems even brighter, maybe thanks to the power of suggestion. So, try to see the Blue-Supermoon on August 30. It won't look blue, but there will not be another Blue-Supermoon for almost 10 years and you'll want to have bragging rights for seeing this one.

--Lauren Likkel is a member of the Chippewa Valley Astronomical Society

Photo caption: The full moon in November 2016 was a Supermoon. It is seen here rising in rural Clark County.

Photo credit: Ruth Forsgren, local photographer

