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Scientists all a-twitter over meteor shower

BRITISH amateur astronomers were to lead the first global "Twitter Meteorwatch" as shooting stars were expected to light up the sky last night.

The Perseid meteor shower occurs every summer as the Earth's orbit takes it through debris scattered by the tail of Comet Swift-Tuttle.

As usual, amateur skywatchers were expected to rig telescopes and don binoculars to enjoy the display, which could see as many as 50 to 80 meteors streaking overhead every hour.

However, one UK group was boldly going where no star-gazers have been before by turning the phenomenon into a global social event with the help of the Twitter networking site.

Newbury Astronomical Society says its "meteor star party" will include thousands of guests from all over the world live "tweeting" images of the Perseids, as well as pictures of the Moon, Jupiter and other celestial objects.

The Twitter Meteorwatch follows on from a similar Twitter Moonwatch organised by the astronomical society in May. Richard Fleet, president of the society, said: "We realised early on that what people want are images of the night sky, so we used our array of telescopes and cameras to provide a constant stream of pictures which we uploaded straight to Twitter.

"We were amazed at how excited people were about our Twitter Moonwatch; we had thousands of people asking us questions directly and viewing images."

The event was planned as part of the International Year of Astronomy.

Shooting stars occur as small particles, often no bigger than a grain of sand, enter the Earth's atmosphere at high speed and burn up.

The Perseids should also be visible tonight.

Robin Scagell, vice-president of the Society for Popular Astronomy, said: "You can look anywhere up in the sky at about a 50 degree angle, or comfortable eye height. South is as good a direction as any.

"Under good conditions you might see one meteor every few minutes, or one or two a minute if you're lucky."

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