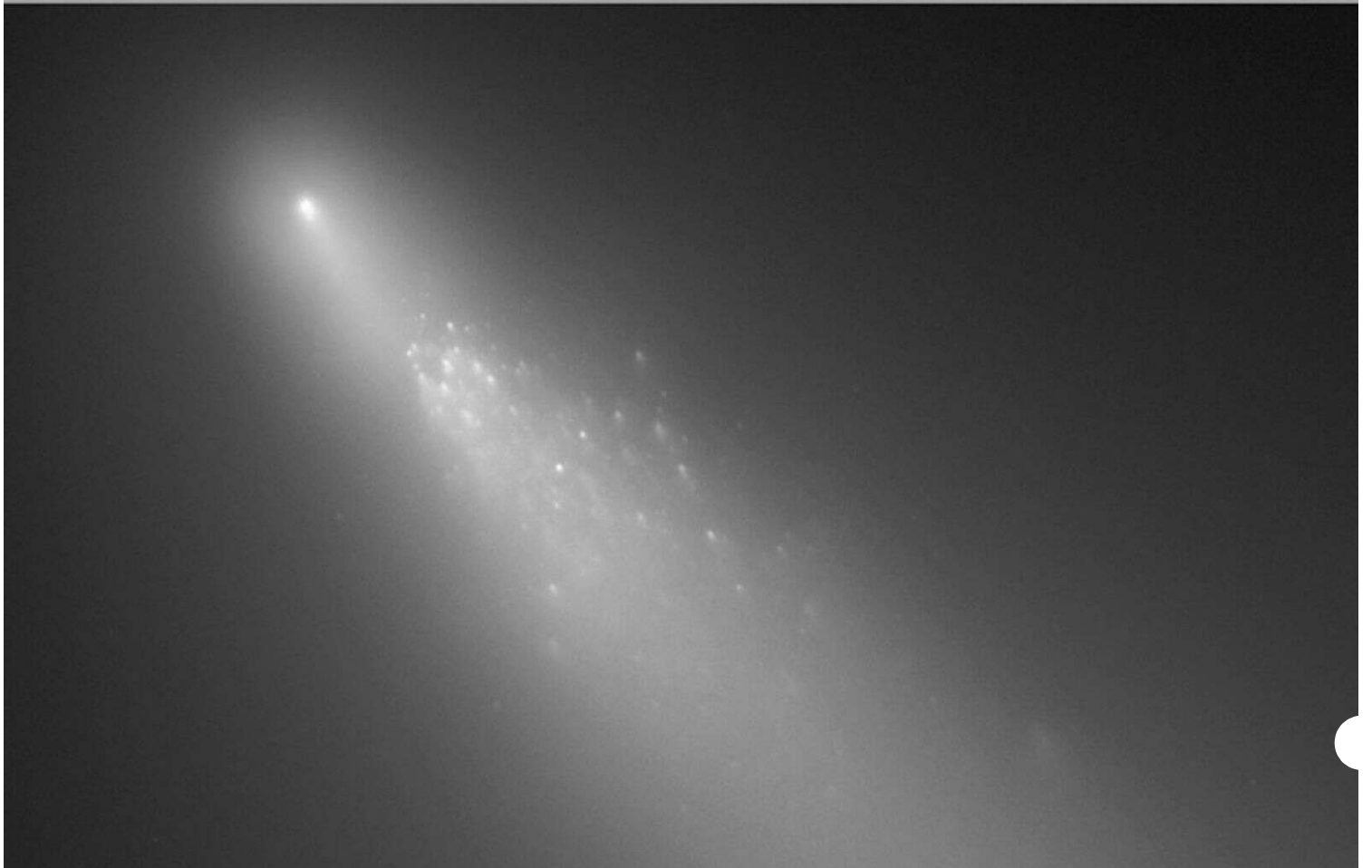
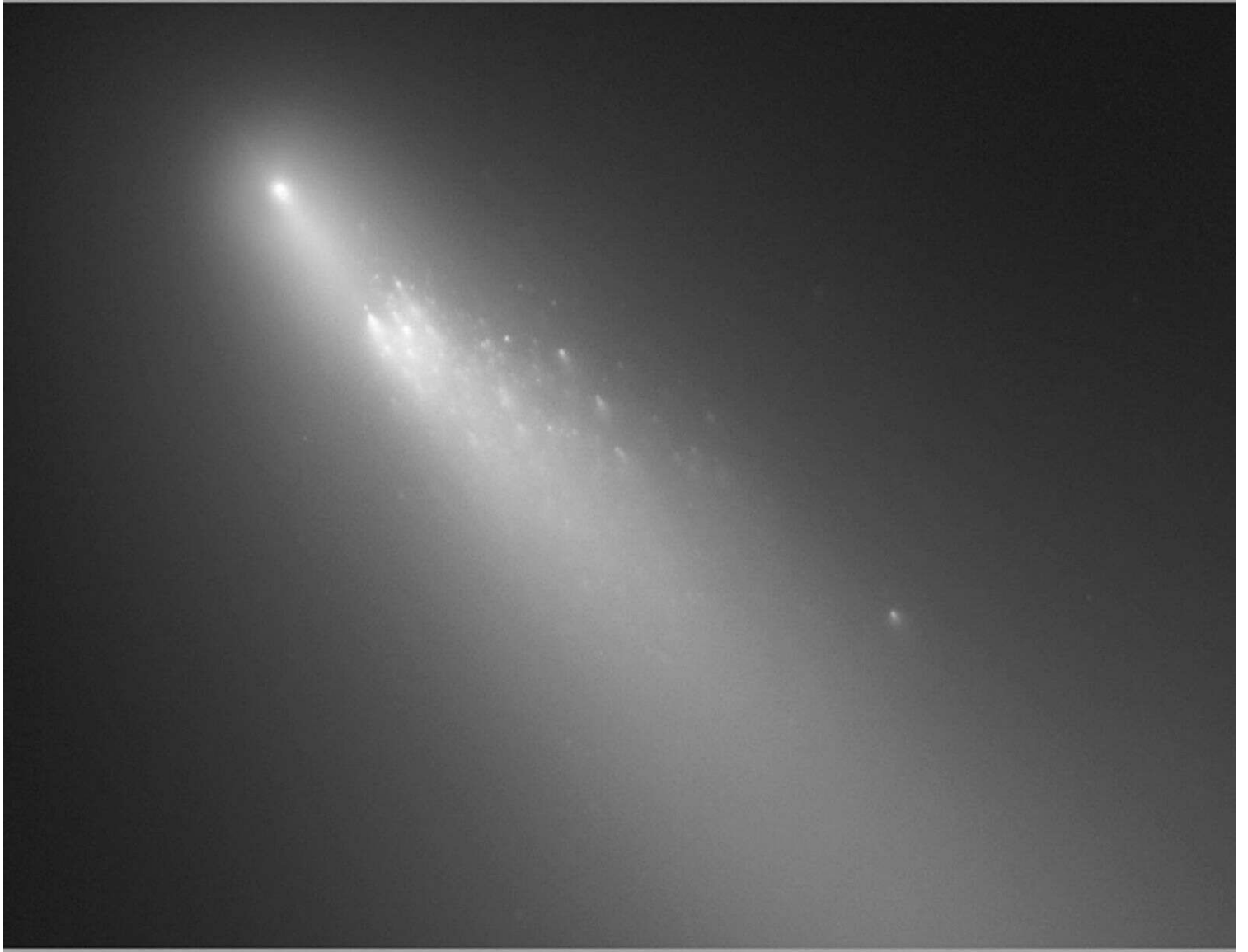
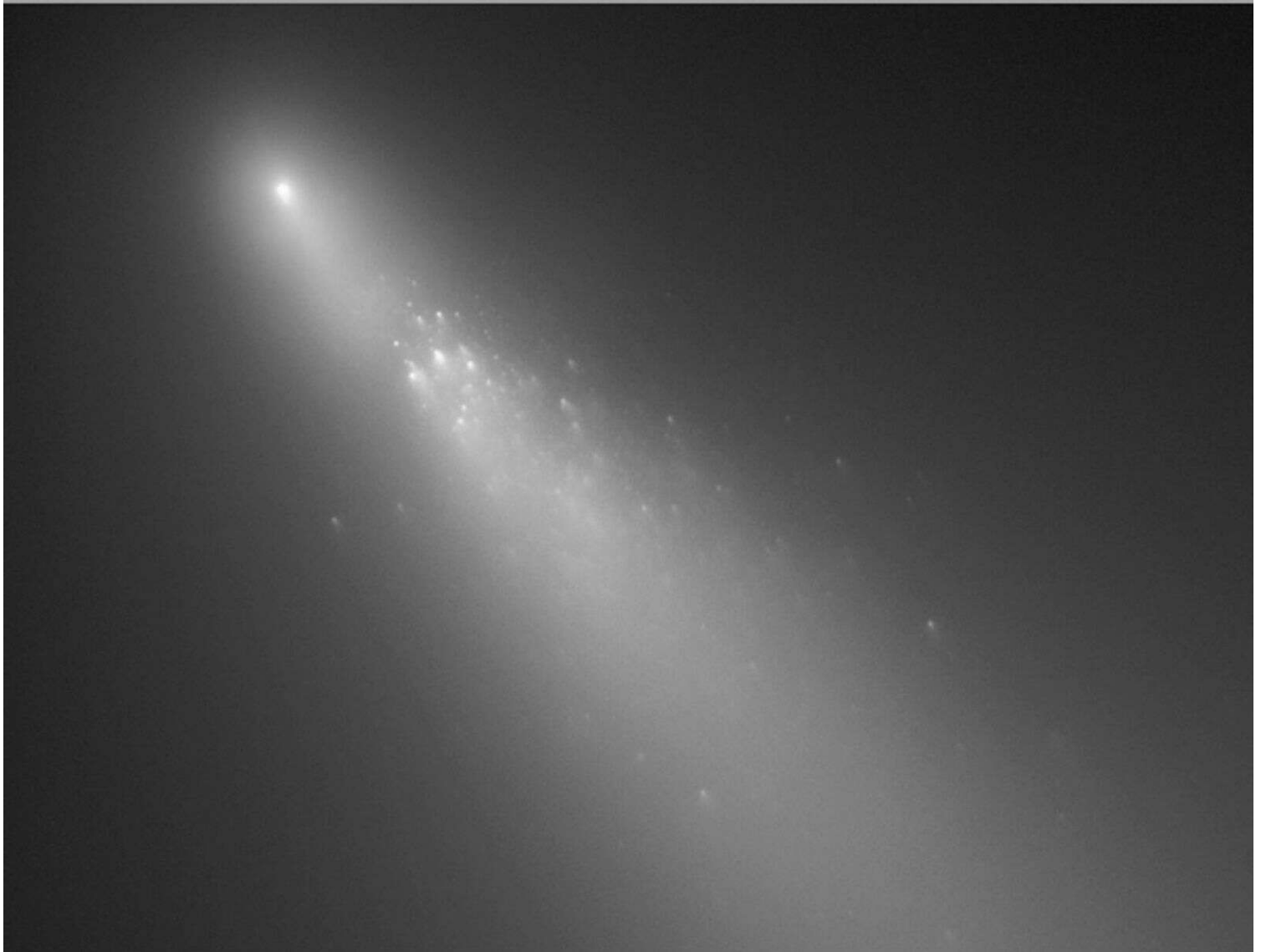


# Get Wild: Could we be in for a memorable night sky treat in May?

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**Steve Elder**  
**Get Wild**





Hubble Space Telescope provided astronomers with extraordinary views of Comet 73P/Schwassmann-Wachmann 3. The fragile comet will be the source of a possibly fantastic meteor shower on May 30 and 31.

*NASA photo*

I recently spent my first couple of nights outside this year during a river trip on the lower Colorado, and I was newly reminded of how being under the stars away from city lights is so good for the mind, body and soul. Just looking up into a clear night sky can be a memorable experience. And being even a little familiar with the map of the stars and upcoming sky events makes it all the more comforting and sometimes exhilarating. Even though I was in sight – and earshot – of I-70, the most extensive view of the sky I had had since the fall was almost as comforting as the quilt I snuggled into for the night with temperatures in the low 30s.

My favorite astral hunting activity is to try to follow meteor showers. And this spring we may be in luck!

[EarthSky.org](https://www.earthsky.org)<sup>[↗]</sup>, a great source for following astronomy, just announced that a very interesting and sporadic late-May meteor shower may provide a “perfect storm” of viewing this year – if a number of factors line up.

On May 30 and 31, the earth will pass through a particularly dense trail of comet debris, the primary source of meteor showers. This may result in a short but intense display, particularly on Monday night, May 30, peaking about an hour before midnight Mountain time. The moon will be new (dark) the night before, so the moonlight won't get in the way of viewing, but you will still want to find as dark of a sky as possible and take time to let your eyes adapt. The meteors will be slow moving, which means they will be relatively dim, though potentially quite numerous.

The radiant, or source, will be high in the sky for those of us in Colorado. The best viewing will be a comfortable 45 degrees from the radiant, so a natural gazing angle.

While the comet (called Schwassmann-Wachmann 3) that is the source of this shower was discovered in 1930 by a couple of astronomers, it was “lost” until 1979 partly due to errors in calculations of its orbit that did not account for occasional close passes to the giant planet Jupiter, whose gravitational pull altered the comet’s path. Following 1979, astronomers were able to track the comet’s return every 5 years.

Then in 1995, the comet increased in luminosity by 600 times, suddenly visible to the naked eye for a time. Shortly following this, observers using telescopes determined that the comet was breaking up – eventually, they believe, into 68 pieces or more. This is good news for meteor shower hunters! More ice particles equals more potential visible meteors.

Will this be a big year for the shower now known as the Tau Herculis? Maybe. A number of factors have to line up, including the number of particles that have been dispersed since 1995 (scientists think it may be a lot), the trajectory of those particles, and their speed. If all of these things are optimal, we could be in for quite a show, [according to EarthSky](#)↗:

“Will we get a wonderful meteor display? We never know for sure. EarthSky readers are encouraged to go out and see for themselves, in real-time, on May 30-31, 2022. A strong meteor shower or a meteor storm will be memorable. If no shower develops, you’ll be among the first to know!

“Any time spent under the nighttime sky is never time wasted.”



Steve Elder

Steve Elder is Chair of the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, a local nonprofit that works with the US Forest Service to preserve the Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan Peak, and Holy Cross Wilderness Areas. Learn more about the alliance at [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org)<sup>[↗]</sup>.

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