



STARRY TRAILS

FEBRUARY 2019

We will continue to enjoy our dazzling winter stars on those clear February evenings, but the brightest planets sparkle in the predawn sky! Venus, Jupiter and Saturn make a lovely grouping in the east before sunrise. On the morning of February 18th, Venus and Saturn will be a degree apart (Illustration 1)! The Crescent Moon joins the three planets show on February 27 & 28 (Illustration 2). Mercury makes a guest appearance in the evening sky around mid-month and will climb highest in the west on February 26 (Illustration 3).

Now, let's grab our winter coats, hat, gloves, warm socks and boots and enjoy our hike. As we head out around 7:30, make sure to have on hand your Starry Trail Map and binoculars. Orion is only one of the phenomenal celestial treats that we will see on our hike. If you are having trouble finding Orion, start by facing west or where the sun set. Turn left, or south. You will see three stars in a row, which make up the belt of Orion. The bright red-orange star up and to the left of the belt is Betelgeuse. The bright blue-white star down and to the right of the belt is Rigel. Now with your binoculars scan just below the belt. You will notice a small fuzzy area. That is the Orion Nebula (M42). New stars are forming in that hydrogen gas cloud! We call this a stellar nursery! Now let's find Orion's best friend. Journey back to the belt of Orion. Draw a line down and to the left, to the brightest star in that part of the sky. You have reached Sirius, the Dog Star. Sirius is the number one brightest star in the night sky. Sirius always follows Orion through the night!

Head back to Orion's Belt. Hike up and to the right and you will see a bright red-orange star. This is Aldebaran, the eye of Taurus, the Bull. Continue to the right and you will notice a small cluster of stars. These stars are the Pleiades or the Seven Sisters (Illustration 4). The Pleiades has to be my favorite group of stars to gaze at through my binoculars. Take a look! What a treasure!! If you look below the Pleiades, the red, orange object is Mars! We are going to continue a counter clockwise loop while looking overhead. Next stop, up and to the left, is another bright star, Capella. Swing to the left to the two stars that look almost identical, Gemini, the Twins.

Hike to the opposite part of the sky, or north. You will notice the Big Dipper up on its handle. By the way, look at the second star in the handle, with binoculars. It is a double star! Head to the cup of the Big Dipper. Take the two stars at the end of the cup and draw an imaginary line to the next bright star. You have reached the North Star! The North Star, or Polaris, is at the end of the handle of the Little Dipper.

Trek to the left and you will see a group of stars that are in the shape of a "W". This is the constellation Cassiopeia (Illustration 5). Grab your binoculars again. From the top point of the W shape, scan slowly up and to the left. You will come upon the Double Cluster in Perseus. Find the bottom point of the W. Scan once again to the left. Do you see a fuzzy circular shape? That is the Andromeda Galaxy (M31). It is 2.5 million light years away!

Finally, we will skip over to the cup of the Big Dipper. Locate the flat part of the cup. Look slowly to the right for the shape of a backwards question mark. This is the head of Leo, the Lion (Illustration 6), a sure sign of spring! How about a challenge? Take your binoculars and scan between Leo and Gemini. Do you see the beautiful Beehive Star Cluster (M44)?

Wow what a fabulous night of stargazing! So, remember... with a little practice, you can see so many awesome sights!! Head in to warm up and enjoy some hot chocolate!

Highlights

February 4 – New Moon.

February 10 – Moon passes south of Mars.

February 12 – First Quarter Moon.

February 18 – Venus & Saturn a degree apart in the eastern predawn sky.

February 19 – Super Full Moon. Closest Full Moon of the year! According to folklore it is the Full Snow Moon or Hunger Moon.

February 26 – Last Quarter Moon.

February 26 – Mercury highest in the west after sunset.

February 27 & 28 – The Crescent Moon slides thru Venus, Jupiter & Saturn in the predawn sky.

Brightest Stars: South – Sirius, Betelgeuse, Rigel, Aldebaran, Procyon **Overhead** – Capella, Castor, Pollux
East – Regulus

Binocular Highlights: The Moon, Andromeda Galaxy M31, Double Cluster near Perseus, Pleiades, Orion Nebula M42, Beehive Cluster M44, Deep sky objects around Capella (M36,37,38) thru the Milky Way to Cassiopeia

Telescope Highlights: The Moon, Mars, Mercury, Uranus, Neptune, M1, M31, M41, M42, M44, M51, M81, M82, M35,36,37,38 (near Capella), NGC869 & 864.

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Night Sky Illustrations created by Suzie Dills using Starry Night Backyard & Stellarium.

Illustrations courtesy of Cassandra Dills

Written by Suzie Dills – Remember to download your Illustrations & Star Map!