



STARRY TRAILS

FEBRUARY 2020

Venus continues to dazzle in the southwestern sky after sunset! As we head through February, Venus will brighten and climb higher. By month's end, Venus will be a shining gem until 9:30 pm. Mercury joins Venus and will put on its best show of 2020, on the night of February 10 (Illustration 1). Mars, Jupiter and Saturn make a stunning group in the predawn sky (Illustration 2).

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 3). The Pleiades has to be my favorite group of stars to gaze at through my binoculars. Take a look! What a treasure!! We are going to continue a counterclockwise 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 4). 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 5), 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 1 – First Quarter Moon.

February 9 – Full Moon. According to folklore it is the Full Snow Moon or Hunger Moon.

February 10 – Mercury at greatest elongation in the west – southwestern sky after sunset.

February 15 – Last Quarter Moon.

February 18 – The Moon passes north of Mars in the predawn sky.

February 19 – The Moon passes south of Jupiter in the predawn sky.

February 20 – The Moon passes south of Saturn in the predawn sky

February 23 – New Moon.

February 27 – The Crescent Moon passes south of Venus.

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, Venus, Mercury, Uranus, Neptune, M1, M31, M41, M42, M44, M51, M81, M82, M35,36,37,38 (near Capella), NGC869 & 864.

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sky maps, illustrations, even audio and video versions of Starry Trails!

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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!