



STARRY TRAILS

MARCH 2020

Good-bye winter, hello spring! Looking forward to celebrating the first day of Spring on March 19th! It will be wonderful to see the early spring flowers and our familiar spring constellations! Our nights will be getting warmer and the sounds of spring peepers will begin to fill the air! Venus continues to blaze brightly in the western sky after sunset. By March 24th, Venus sets four hours after sunset! It pairs up with the Crescent Moon on the 26th & 27th and ends the month 3 degrees from the Pleiades, making the pair a lovely binocular target (Illustration 1). Our spectacular planet show continues in the morning sky before sunrise. The predawn planet show featuring Jupiter, Saturn and Mars grows more striking with a gathering of the Moon on March 18th (Illustration 2). The extraordinary show continues with the conjunction of Mars and Jupiter on March 20th (Illustration 3) and the conjunction of Mars and Saturn on March 31st. March 31st also features the most compact threesome of our three outer planets (Illustration 4).

Remember that Daylight Savings Time starts on March 8th, so the sun sets later. Our hike will begin at 8:30pm, bundle up, hats, gloves, coats and grab your Starry Trail Map and binoculars. We will still be able to see our dazzling stars of winter too! Our magnificent, Orion, the Hunter will be our guide for the hike.

To meet up with Orion, face west or direction of the sunset. Turn to the left. There you will see Orion's star pattern. See the three stars in a row? That is 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 (Illustration 5). 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 slightly to the right and you will notice a small cluster of stars. These stars are the Pleiades or the Seven Sisters. The Pleiades has to be my favorite group of stars to gaze at through my binoculars. Take a look! What a treasure!! Now 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. These are Gemini, the Twins (Illustration 6).

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 7). 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. You will need to have a good view of the northern sky. 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 8). A sure sign of spring! How about a challenge? Take your binoculars and scan between Leo and Gemini, the Twins. Do you see the beautiful Beehive Star Cluster (M44)?

Looking forward too many stargazing nights ahead! - Next month, more signs of spring!

Highlights

March 2 – First Quarter Moon.

March 8 – Daylight Savings Time begins at 2:00am.

March 8 – Venus passes 2 degrees north of Uranus.

March 9 – Full Moon. According to folklore it is the Full Worm Moon of Full Crow Moon.

March 16 – Last Quarter Moon.

March 18 – The Moon passes south of Mars, Jupiter & Saturn in the predawn sky.

March 19 - First Day of Spring, Vernal Equinox, begins in the Northern Hemisphere at 11:50 pm.

March 20 – Mars passes south of Jupiter in the predawn sky.

March 21 – The Moon passes south of Mercury in the predawn sky.

March 24 – New Moon.

March 24 – Venus at greatest elongation.

March 26 – The Moon passes south of Venus.

March 31 – Mars passes south of Saturn.

March 31 – Most compact gathering of Jupiter, Saturn & Mars in the predawn sky.

Brightest Stars: South to Southwest – 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, 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!