



STARRY TRAILS

DECEMBER 2020

Our two gas giant planets, Jupiter and Saturn, have put on a spectacular show in our evening sky since July. Now it is time for the Grand Finale! Jupiter and Saturn continue to get closer and will be one-tenth of a degree apart on the evening of December 21st (Illustration 1). This will be their closest encounter since 1623!! Mars continues to blaze a bright red, orange, high in the southern sky (Illustration 2).

Also, on December 21st, we celebrate the Winter Solstice, or the first day of winter, here in the Northern Hemisphere. Although this begins the winter season, when we step out on a clear night, the brightest stars of the year put on a dazzling show for us! Other highlights include the return of our magnificent Orion, the Hunter and the Geminid Meteor Shower.

Around 7:00 pm we will begin our hike. We need to put on our winter coats, hats, gloves, and boots. Grab your Starry Trail map and binoculars and let's enjoy the brightest stars of the year and fabulous star hopping! Face west (where the sun sets), and you will see the three bright stars which make up the Summer Triangle, Vega, Deneb and Altair. We shall say farewell until next summer. Now look directly overhead for the four stars that form the Great Square of Pegasus (Illustration 3). Trek up and to the right and you will see a group of stars that are in the shape of a "W". This is the constellation Cassiopeia. Grab your binoculars. From the bottom point of the W shape, scan slowly to the left (about halfway to Pegasus). Do you see a fuzzy circular shape? That is the Andromeda Galaxy (M31). It is 2.5 million light years away! Find the top point of the W. Scan once again to the left and up slightly. You will come upon the Double Cluster in Perseus.

Turn to the right to face north. Journey down to the northern horizon and you will find the Big Dipper. 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 (Illustration 4). The bright star up and to the right of Polaris is Capella. If you scan with your binoculars to the right and slightly up from Capella, you may spy a few lovely star clusters!

Continue to turn to the right, slightly, to face east. 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! Spectacular!! Hike down from the Pleiades and you will see a V shape in the stars. This is the face of Taurus, the Bull. The bright red-orange star is Aldebaran (Illustration 5).

As you trek down from Taurus, you have arrived at the most magnificent picture in our stars, Orion, the Hunter! The three stars in a row 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. The two stars to the left of Orion, that look almost identical, are Gemini, the Twins.

Time to head inside and warm up. Best wishes for a wonderful holiday season!

Next month, Orion, the Hunter's best friend!

Highlights:

December 7 – Last Quarter Moon.

December 12 – The Crescent Moon passes north of Venus in the predawn sky.

December 13 – Geminid Meteor Shower peaks.

December 14 – New Moon.

December 16 – The Crescent Moon passes south of Jupiter & Saturn.

December 20 – The Moon passes south of Neptune.

December 21 – **The Great Conjunction of Jupiter & Saturn!!**

December 21 – Longest night of the year. Winter solstice occurs at 5:02am.

December 21 – First Quarter Moon.

December 22 – The Ursid Meteor Shower peaks.

December 22 – Venus passes north of Antares in the predawn sky.

December 23 – The Moon passes south of Mars.

December 24 – The Moon passes south of Uranus.

December 29 – Full Moon. According to folklore this is the Full Cold Moon.

Brightest Stars: **West:** Vega, Deneb, Altair. **South:** Fomalhaut. **East:** Capella, Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, Rigel, Castor, Pollux.

Binocular Highlights: The Moon, Milky Way from Capella through the Summer Triangle, Andromeda Galaxy (M31), Double Cluster, Pleiades, Orion Nebula (M42).

Telescope Highlights: The Moon, Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Uranus, Neptune, M1, M2, M31, M15, M42, M81, M82, M35, M36,37,38 (near Capella), NGC869 & 864.

Starry Trails is a fun & easy way to explore the night sky as it appears from your backyard! Journey over to **StarryTrails.com** & get everything you need to navigate the night sky from 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