



STARRY TRAILS

MARCH 2023

March opens with the stunning show of Venus and Jupiter in the western sky! Venus is the brighter of the pair. The pair starts at half a degree apart on March 1 (Illustration 1) and the gap grows to 30 degrees by month's end (Illustration 2). Jupiter continues to sink lower and Venus higher through the month. The crescent Moon makes a lovely pairing with Jupiter on March 22 and with Venus on the following evening. Mars can be found in Taurus, the Bull (Illustration 3).

Spring has sprung! It is great to see the early spring flowers! We celebrate the first day of spring on March 20th and our nights are getting warmer. Remember that Daylight Savings Time starts on March 12th, so the sun sets later. Our hike will begin at 8:30pm, bundle up, hats, gloves, and 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 4). 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 5).

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 6). 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 7). 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 and the sound of spring peepers filling the air!

Next month, more signs of spring!

Highlights

March 1 & 2 – Venus & Jupiter less than one degree apart in the western sky after sunset.

March 7 – Full Moon. According to folklore it is the Full Worm Moon or Full Crow Moon.

March 12 – Daylight Savings Time begins at 2:00 am.

March 14 – Last Quarter Moon.

March 19 – The Moon passes south of Saturn in the predawn sky.

March 20 – First Day of Spring, Vernal Equinox, begins in the Northern Hemisphere at 5:24 pm.

March 21 – New Moon.

March 22 – The Crescent Moon passes south of Jupiter, low in the western sky, 40 minutes after sunset.

March 23 – The Crescent Moon passes south of Venus.

March 28 – First Quarter Moon.

March 28 – The Moon passes north of Mars.

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, Jupiter, Mars, Uranus, 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.