

IN THE SKY DURING MARCH¹

March will be a very interesting month to enjoy the night sky. As the bright grouping of winter stars drift lower in the west, they will be joined by the bright stars of spring that will be slowly climbing up above the eastern horizon. They will be led by Leo (the Lion), which will be in good view by the time it gets dark. The head and chest of Leo looks like a backwards question mark with the bright star Regulus representing the dot at the bottom. Leo's hips and tail are formed by a right triangle of three stars. In the early evening, Leo appears to be standing straight up on his tail. If you have difficulty finding Leo, first find the Big Dipper and then use its "pointer stars" to point in the opposite direction from the North Star. The pointer stars will lead you right to Leo.

As Leo crosses the sky each night, it will be followed by the constellation Virgo (the Maiden) with its bright star Spica. Spica will rise at about 9:45 (standard time) as the month begins and at about 8:45 (daylight time by the end of the month). The constellation Bootes (the Herdsman) with its bright star Arcturus will be to the left (northward) of Spica. Notice that the curve of the handle of the Big Dipper can be extended to first find Arcturus and then Spica.

Although the planet Jupiter is now gone from the evening sky, it has been replaced by Saturn, which is midway between Regulus and Spica. The reddish planet Mars will be almost overhead in the evening sky and below (southward) and a little to the left (eastward) of the bright twin stars of Gemini. Brilliant Venus will be low in the western sky in the very early evening, but it will be slowly climbing higher. Venus will be joined by the fleet planet Mercury during the last few days of March. Look for Mercury below and to the right of Venus. Each night, Mercury will get a little closer to Venus.

The big event of March will be the passing of the crescent Moon over the southernmost edge of the Pleiades (or Seven Sisters) on the evening of March 20, starting at about 8:00 CDT. As seen with binoculars or a small telescope, the dark edge of the Moon will gradually move up to and cover some of the stars of this Open Star Cluster. Other stars will be barely missed as the Moon moving eastward in its orbit goes by them.

Highlights:

- Mar. 1 The bright Moon will rise to the right of the bright planet Saturn. They will travel together all night.
- Mar. 2 The Moon will lead Spica, the brightest star in the constellation Virgo (the Maiden) into the sky at about 10:45. Brighter Saturn will be farther above Spica.
- Mar. 17 The very thin crescent Moon will be about a fist-width above Venus, which will be just above the western horizon. Look about 30 minutes after sunset.
- Mar. 20 This is the day of the spring equinox when spring begins in the northern hemisphere. On this day, the Sun rises straight in the east and sets straight in the west everywhere on Earth, and everyone has 12 hours of daylight.
- The crescent Moon will pass through the southernmost edge of the Pleiades (or Seven Sisters) Open Star Cluster starting at about 8:00 p.m. CDT.
- Mar. 21 Saturn will be at opposition, which means that it will be on the opposite side of the Earth as the Sun. On this day it will rise at sunset and set at sunrise.
- Mar. 24 The Moon will lead orange Mars across the sky. By tomorrow night, the Moon will have moved in its orbit so that it will follow Mars across the sky. Both will be below bright Pollux and then Castor, the twin stars of Gemini (the Twins).
- Mar. 28 The Moon will again be near Saturn. Since the Moon completes an orbit in 27.3 days, it can pass the same celestial object twice in one month.

Moon Phases:

<u>Phase</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Rises</u>	<u>Highest point</u>	<u>Sets</u>	<u>When Visible</u>
Last quarter	Mar. 7	Midnight	Sunrise	Noon	A.M.
New moon	Mar. 15	Sunrise	Noon	Sunset	Not visible
First quarter	Mar. 23	Noon	Sunset	Midnight	P.M.
Full moon	Mar. 29	Sunset	Midnight	Sunrise	All night

¹Dates and times are approximate.

Sources: StarDate, Mar./Apr. 2010. Vol. 38, No. 2.

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SkyandTelescope.com/skychart.