

The Night Sky

Catch Mercury Low in the West after Sunset

This upcoming month of April 2016 offers the best time this year to see planet Mercury in the evening sky. Throughout the first 3 weeks of the month, Mercury should be readily visible low in the west-northwest sky in the evening twilight after the sun has set. It's at its greatest brightness during the first week of the month and reaches its greatest elongation from the sun on April 18th. A waxing crescent moon will be to the upper left of Mercury on the evening of April 8th. Make sure you find a western horizon free of any obstructions to see our innermost planet during this time.

Throughout the month of April, Jupiter dominates the evening sky. It will be blazing brightly in the eastern sky as evening twilight ends and remains visible throughout most of the night-time hours as it moves east to west as the earth rotates. This giant planet is currently in the southern portion of the constellation of Leo.

The next planet to rise as the night progresses is Mars, which pops up above the horizon in the southeast just before midnight on April 1st. By the end of the month, Mars-rise will occur around 10 p.m. Mars significantly brighten this upcoming month as it approaches a close opposition to us in May. By the end of the month, Mars will be nearly as bright as Jupiter. Approximately one-half hour after Mars rises, planet Saturn rises, again, in the southeast. The separation between Mars and Saturn slowly decreases throughout the month as both of these planets form a noticeable triangle with the bright supergiant star Antares. Mars, Saturn, and Antares will make a beautiful grouping over the next few months. This trio will be joined by the waning gibbous moon from April 24th through the 26th.

Venus is now too close to the sun in the morning sky to see it from our latitude. This brightest of the planets will pass behind the sun on June 6th and return to the evening sky in late-June/early-July.

The moon will be full at 1:24 a.m. EDT on April 22nd. Native Americans had a variety of names associated with the full moon of April, all associated with the spring season. These names include the Full Pink Moon, the Full Sprouting Grass Moon, the Egg Moon, and the Full Fish Moon.

Should the sky be clear the night of April 16th, there will be a free public astronomy open house at the ETSU Powell Observatory from 8 to 10 p.m. At these open houses, the public can view objects in the sky through telescopes and hear talks by faculty of the Physics and Astronomy Department. Note that the open houses are cancelled if the sky is cloudy. This will be the last astronomy open house until next fall. Further information about these open houses and directions to the observatory can be found on the web at <http://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/observatory/default.php>.

This month's Night Sky was written by Dr. Donald G. Luttermoser, Chair of the Department of Physics and Astronomy at ETSU. He can be reached at lutter@mail.etsu.edu. Astronomy-related information for the public, including a link to the ETSU Powell Observatory, can be found at

<http://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/> by selecting the Public Outreach pull down menu at the top of this web page.