

The Night Sky

Jupiter at Opposition/Mars Brightens Significantly

The “king of the planets,” Jupiter, is directly opposite on the sky to the sun on March 8th. Planets at opposition are typically at their brightest light at these times. Jupiter will be the brightest “star-like” object in the evening sky throughout the month. At opposition, Jupiter will rise in the east just as the sun is setting. A nearly full moon will be just below Jupiter on March 21st.

We now have to wait until around midnight for the next bright planet to rise – Mars. As each day progresses throughout the month, this red planet brightens significantly – matching the brightness of the 8th brightest star in the night sky, Procyon, at the start of the month to exceeding the brightness of 4th brightest star, Arcturus, at months’ end. Mars enters the constellation of Scorpius during the first week of March. Watch the separation between Mars and the planet Saturn shrink over this month as Mars skirts just to the north bright red supergiant star Antares. Note that this star gets its name in reference to the planet Mars: “the rival of Ares,” where ‘Ares’ is the Greek god of war and Mars is the name the Romans gave to the god of war.

Saturn is the next planet up, which rises within an hour of Mars’ rising. Saturn is still sitting to the northeast Antares. All through the month of March, Mars, Saturn, and Antares make a very pretty grouping of celestial objects throughout the night time hours. On March 1st and 2nd, a waning gibbous moon will join this grouping as well – it should be spectacular!

March marks the last month of the year when Venus can be spotted in the bright morning twilight. It rises an hour before the sun at the beginning of the month, but by months’ end, it rises only 25 minutes before the sun and will be very difficult to spot. Venus will return to the evening sky during the last half of June.

Standard Time ends and Daylight Savings Time begins at 2 a.m. on March 13 – make sure to move your clocks forward by one hour before you go to bed on the 12th. Spring returns at 12:30 a.m. on March 20th, when the sun crosses the celestial equator moving from the southern hemisphere into the northern hemisphere of the celestial sphere. A few days later, the moon will be full at 8:01 p.m. EDT on March 23rd.

Should the sky be clear the night of March 19th, 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. Make sure you dress warmly for these open houses since evening temperatures can still be low in March. Note that the open houses are cancelled if the sky is cloudy. 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>.

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