

The Night Sky

Venus Returns to the Evening Sky

We have gone a few months without any bright planets being visible in the evening sky – this changes this month with Venus returning to the evening sky. However, Venus remains very low in the west-southwestern sky after sunset and will be difficult to spot in the bright twilight throughout most of the month. However by the last week of February, you should be able to easily spot our brightest planet within an hour after sunset low in the west-southwest. On the very last day of the month of February, sharp-eyed observers might also catch a glimpse of planet Mercury skimming the horizon below Venus in the bright evening twilight.

We have to wait until after midnight before we can spot our next planet with Jupiter rising a little before 2 a.m. EST at the beginning of the month. By the end of February, Jupiter pops above the southeastern horizon a little before midnight. The next planet up is the red-planet Mars, which rises a half-hour after Jupiter as February begins. However, Mars will be moving on the night sky relatively quick compared to the other outer planets. Due to this, Mars rise time of 2:30 a.m. will stay constant throughout the month as it races through the constellation of Scorpius. If you are up at that time of the night, watch Mars' progression north of the bright, red supergiant star Antares – even after a few days, it is easy to note the motion of Mars with respect to the background stars.

The final planet-rise is the ringed-planet Saturn which rises a little before 5 a.m. as February starts. As the month progresses, Saturn rises earlier and earlier, rising a little after 3 a.m. by month's end. Saturn lies just to the north of the "teapot's lid" of Sagittarius, remaining low in the southeast in the predawn hours.

Since the month of January had two full moons, the month of February, with only 28 days, will not experience a full moon – a relatively rare occurrence. Note however that on February 16th, observers with a clear southwestern horizon might be able to spot a waxing crescent moon just to the upper-left of Venus 20 minutes after sunset.

The next free public astronomy open house at the ETSU Powell Observatory will occur on Saturday, February 24th 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. Make sure you dress warmly since you will be standing outside to look through our telescopes. 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.aspx>.

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. Any students wishing to pursue a career in Physics or Astronomy are encouraged to contact him at this email address. 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.