

The Night Sky

Venus and Mercury Conjunction

Venus has been shining brilliantly high in the western sky after sunset for the past few months, setting nearly 4 hours after the sun. In May 2020, Venus starts its plunge back towards the sun so that by month's end, Venus sets only ½ hour after the sun. During the last week of May, train your binoculars on Venus and you should be able to see the crescent of our nearest neighbor as it passes between us and the sun on June 3rd. On May 21st, Venus has a close conjunction with our innermost planet Mercury, with brighter Venus being just above Mercury. This will be a good chance to see Mercury in the bright twilight due to the brightness of Venus.

Mercury will first become visible in the evening sky on May 11th in the west-northwest, well below Venus. As Venus continues to sink in the western sky after sunset, Mercury gets higher and higher until it reaches greatest eastern elongation from the sun on June 4th.

The two gas giant planets, Jupiter and Saturn, have been visible in the eastern sky a few hours before sunrise. During this month, these two planets start to rise prior to midnight by the end of the month. These two largest planets in the solar system are separated on the sky by only 5 degrees of arc. These two planets will have an extra-close conjunction with each other on December 21st later this year.

One now has to wait until the early morning hours to catch our next naked-eye planet, Mars. The red planet rises a little before 3 a.m. EDT as May opens, and about an hour sooner by the end of the month. Mars is now moving rather quickly against the background stars, moving from the constellation of Capricornus into Aquarius on May 9th. Mars continues to brighten during this time and should be quite easy to spot in the early morning sky.

The moon will be at full phase at 6:45 a.m. EDT on May 7th. This full moon happens less than a day after perigee (closest approach to the earth), making for our third and final "supermoon" of the year. Supermoons are noticeably brighter and larger than normal full moons. Full moons in the month of May are known as the "Full Flower Moon" by Native Americans since flowers are typically in full bloom during this month.

The ETSU Powell Observatory open houses are on hiatus until September. Later this summer, the 2020-2021 schedule for our Astronomy open houses can be found on the web at <https://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/observatory/default.php>.

The ETSU Planetarium Shows are also on hiatus until September. Later this summer, the 2020-2021 schedule for the ETSU Planetarium Shows will be posted on the web at <https://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/outreach/planetarium.php>.

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