The Night Sky

Morning Mercury-Jupiter Conjunction

Only one naked-eye planet is visible in the evening sky, the red planet Mars. On the evening of March 4th, the red planet is just to the left of the open star cluster, the Pleiades in Taurus. Binoculars will really enhance the view with reddish Mars shining close to the blue-white stars of the Pleiades. Mars hasn't been this close to the Pleiades since 2006 and won't be this close again until 2038. If it's cloudy that night, no need to worry, Mars will be in the vicinity of the Pleiades through the first half of March. On March 19th, a waxing crescent Moon will be within 3 degrees of Mars, making for quite an early spring celestial sight!

In the morning sky, a very close conjunction between the largest planet of the solar system and the smallest planet on March 5th. Mercury and Jupiter will be less than one-half degree apart on this morning shining low in east-southeast one-half hour before sunrise. Meanwhile, the ringed-planet Saturn will be visible 8.5 degrees of arc to the upper right of this pair. Unfortunately, the brightest planet in the solar system (as seen from Earth), Venus is still too close to the Sun to be seen. Venus will be in conjunction with the Sun on March 26th. Our second innermost planet to the Sun makes is its dazzling debut in the evening sky in mid-April.

Should we have a clear sky during the first week of March, look towards the western horizon and you might be able to spot the soft glow of the zodiac light if you are in a dark area of the community. The zodiac light is caused by sunlight scattering off of small dust particles orbiting the Sun in the inner solar system.

Daylight Savings Time starts at 2 a.m. on Sunday, March 14. Nearly a week later on March 20th, spring begins at 5:37 a.m. EDT. At this time, the Sun is located on the vernal equinox on the celestial sphere and located in the sky directly over the Earth's equator.

The Moon will be at full phase on March 28th at 12:50 p.m. EDT. Native Americans referred to the late March Full Moon as the Full Worm Moon since earthworms appear in the soil as the ground warms in the spring.

The ETSU Powell Observatory open houses are on hiatus until further notice. Once the current health crisis is over, the 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 further notice. Once ETSU returns to normal operations, the schedule for the ETSU Planetarium Shows will be posted on the web at https://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/outreach/planetarium.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@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.