

The Night Sky

Two Close Planetary Conjunctions Grace the Morning Sky

Early morning observers are in for a real treat this upcoming month; two separate close planetary conjunctions take place, one near the beginning of the month, the other at the end. On the morning of April 5, the Red Planet and the Ringed Planet have a very close conjunction with Mars sitting only 24 arcminutes to the lower-left of Saturn. Brilliant Venus can be seen just to the left of this pair on this date.

Then at the end of the month on April 30th, the two brightest planets in the night sky have a very close conjunction. On this morning, Venus and Jupiter will be less than ½-degree of arc apart. One will be able to see both planets in the same field of view with a low-power telescope. Getting two such close conjunctions involving four planets in the same month is quite rare, so let's hope for a clear sky on both of those mornings.

Another interesting planetary grouping occurs near mid-month, when Jupiter, Venus, Mars, and Saturn form an equally-spaced strait line on the mornings of April 16th through the 18th. Starting from just above the East-Southeastern horizon 45 minutes before sunrise, Jupiter shines brightly. Moving to the upper-right, the next planet in this line is even more brilliant Venus, followed by Mars then Saturn. This configuration should make for some beautiful pictures.

We finally get some planetary action in the evening sky with Mercury returning during the last week of the month. On April 29, our innermost planet lies just to the left of the Pleiades star cluster in Taurus and should be very easy to see. So, if you have never spotted Mercury in the night sky, this evening appearance may be your best chance to catch this swiftly moving planet.

On the evening of April 4th, the waxing-crescent Moon sits just to the left of the Pleiades. This will be a very photogenic conjunction with earthshine lighting up the dark portion of the Moon. Later in the month, the Moon will be at full phase 2:57 p.m. EDT on April 16th. Native Americans called the April Full Moon the "Full Pink Moon" due to the many pink blossoms sprouting in the springtime.

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>.

However, the ETSU Planetarium Shows are taking place this spring semester. Please check the Planetarium web page at <https://www.etsu.edu/cas/physics/outreach/planetarium.php> for further information.

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