

Mountain Skies

March and April 2002

AS EARTH ORBITS THE SUN in a counterclockwise direction as seen from above the North Pole, the sun appears to move counterclockwise, eastward, against the stars. Since it takes the sun approximately 365 days or so to make the full 360° circle, the sun moves eastward about one degree per day with respect to the stars. This is the annual motion of the sun in relation to Earth's orbit, in addition to the much more familiar diurnal motion of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west each day in relation to Earth's rotation on its axis.

Since our lives are organized by the solar time and most of us see the stars early in the night, we tend to think that it's the stars, the "celestial sphere" that are moving. Hence we tend to look at the changing position of the sun against the background stars as the stars move 1° west with respect to the sun each day. We see this as motion of the sky . . . the sun, moon and stars. A star setting four minutes after the sun one day will set with the sun the next. The sun thus appears to be eternally climbing the wall of stars in the evening western sky, continually pulling other stars up above the horizon in the east, much like a hamster in an exercise wheel. Fortunately, the celestial sphere doesn't squeak.

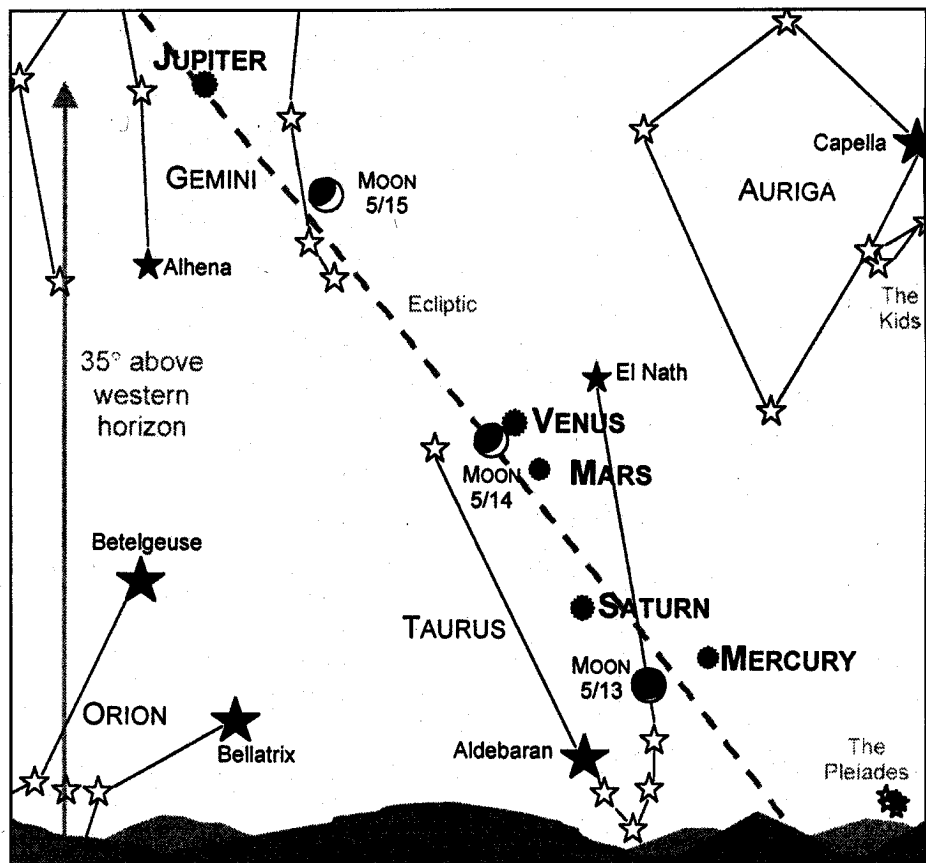
In March, Earth swings through the vernal equinox, headed for the summer solstice, and the sun climbs through the spring constellations into those of summer. The constellations "of" a season are those that the sun moves through on its annual pilgrimage. Since that puts the sun between us and those constellations, they are invisible in that season. The constellations of summer are Gemini, Cancer and Leo (as indicated by newspaper horoscopes!), and they are visible in the early evening as the sun climbs through the constellations of spring: Pisces, Aries, and Taurus.

In March, the sun is in Pisces and the constellations of late spring and summer stretch high across the southern sky (see diagram). Between the vernal equinox on March 20 and the summer solstice on June 21, there will be a beautiful dance of bright stars, planets and the crescent moon in the western evening sky.

Celestial Dance

JUPITER AND SATURN have brightened the nights of winter wandering through Gemini and Taurus. Mars has also been visible through the winter, wandering through Capricorn, Aquarius (see Mountain Skies,

BETWEEN THE VERNAL EQUINOX ON MARCH 20 AND THE SUMMER SOLSTICE ON JUNE 21, THERE WILL BE A BEAUTIFUL DANCE OF BRIGHT STARS, PLANETS AND THE CRESCENT MOON IN THE WESTERN EVENING SKY.



Western horizon at 8:30 p.m., May 13-15, 2002

November/December 2000) and Pisces, moving into Aries on February 27. In January, Venus passed behind the sun and moved into the evening sky. Venus is the brightest planet, outshone in the sky by only the sun and moon. In early March it will be less than 10° above the western horizon at sunset.

By the beginning of April, Venus has joined Mars in Aries and is 15° above the sunset horizon. With Jupiter high in Gemini, Saturn in the V of Taurus (the Hyades, HIGH-uh-dees, star cluster much like the more distant Pleiades), bright Venus in Aries, and Mars mid-way between Venus and Saturn, there are four visible planets in the western sky.

But wait! Don't order yet! On April 7, elusive Mercury passes behind the sun and moves into the evening sky for its best appearance of the year. It will be visible in the twilight glare by mid-April, just north (right) and west (below) of Venus. Look for it along the ecliptic, the plane of the solar system, which can be imagined as a line curving along the line of planets.

In early May, Mars catches up to Saturn just as Venus catches up to Mars, putting the three planets in a tight triangle from May 3 to 10. The trio should fit within the field of view of most binoculars and provide a beautiful view of contrasts in color and brightness. Venus is brightest because it is closest, it's only slightly smaller than Earth and it reflects nearly all the sunlight that strikes off its solid deck of clouds.

Gathering of the Planets

ON MAY 13, the five planets are gathered most tightly with Mercury a little more than 33° west (below and right) of Jupiter and Saturn, Mars and Venus stretching between the smallest and largest visible planets. Our other visible world, the moon, joins in the gathering as a thin crescent south, below and left, of Mercury on the 13th. It will hang next to Venus on the 14th, between Venus and Jupiter on the 15th and above Jupiter on the 16th.

As Mercury moves back toward the sun, the planets will again disperse with one last grand sight as Venus catches up to Jupiter in late May. The two brilliant planets then shine together in the cosmic twins of Gemini.

—Aileen O'Donoghue

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