**April Night Sky**

Sirius and Canopus are the first stars to appear at dusk. Sirius, the brightest, is high in the northwest and Canopus, the second brightest, in the southwest. They are the brightest stars in the sky though the planets Jupiter and Venus are brighter.

Below Sirius are bluish Rigel and orange Betelgeuse, the brightest stars in Orion. Between them is a line of three stars: Orion's belt. To southern hemisphere star watchers, the line of three makes the bottom of 'The Pot' or 'The Saucepan', now tipped on its side. A line of fainter stars makes the Pot's handle, or Orion's sword in the northern hemisphere view. Binoculars show a misty patch in the middle of the handle - the Orion Nebula, a cloud of glowing gas 1300 light years away.

Below Orion two orange-red ‘stars’ are seen. The one on the left is the star Aldebaran, making one eye of Taurus the bull while the one on the right is planet Mars. Betelgeuse, Aldebaran and Mars make a big triangle of orange ‘stars’ in the northwest.

Sirius marks the head of the constellation of Canis Major, the big dog, following Orion the hunter across the sky. Below and right of Sirius is Procyon. Procyon is the head of Canis Minor.

Low in the northern sky is a fuzzy patch of light, the Praesepe cluster, marking the shell of Cancer the Crab. Also called the Beehive cluster, Praesepe is 600 light years away and its stars are 600 million years old. The biggest & brightest stars in the original cluster have long ago burnt out so only the medium-brightness stars remain. This gives the cluster its uniform appearance in contrast to the much younger Matariki cluster which still has several prominent stars. Matariki slips into the Sun’s glare later this month, as it sets in the northwest an hour after sunset.

Lower and further left are Pollux and Castor, the heads of Gemini the twins, making a vertical pair. Though related in myth, the Twins are quite different from each other. Pollux is an orange star 31 times brighter than the sun and 34 light years from us. Castor is a hot white star about 47 times the sun's brightness and 51 light years away.

Crux, the Southern Cross, is high in the southeast. Below it, and brighter, are Beta and Alpha Centauri, often called 'The Pointers'. Alpha Centauri is the closest naked-eye star, 4.3 light years away. Beta Centauri, like most of the stars in Crux, is a blue-giant star hundreds of light years away.

Crux points across and down to the Small Magellanic Cloud and on to Achernar near southwest. The Large Magellanic Cloud is roughly above these two. Easily seen by eye on a dark moonless night, these clouds are two small galaxies about 160 000 and 200 000 light years away.

Midway between Orion and Crux lies brilliant Canopus of Carina. Canopus is another very bright distant star; 13 000 times brighter than the sun and 300 light years away.

Rising in the southeast is Scorpius the scorpion. Antares, another orange 'red giant' star, marks the scorpion's body. The scorpion is on its back now. The Milky Way is broadest and brightest here.

The Lyrid meteor shower peaks in the early-morning hours on 22 April. The first significant meteor shower since January, the Lyrids display some 15-20 meteors per hour in good conditions. The moon, just two days past first quarter, may make it hard to see the faintest meteors.

**VENUS** : Venus is moving to the far side of the Sun, too close to the Sun to spot. By mid-month the planet has emerged into the evening sky (just above the horizon soon after sunset) and remains visible for the rest of 2021, slowly getting higher and brighter as the year wears on.

**MARS** : Mars will be seen low in the southwestern sky after sunset mid-month, along with stars Betelgeuse and Aldebaran, and by Anzac Day it is setting by 8.30pm. Mars is too small to show much detail in a telescope, but it still shines at a respectable magnitude of +1.4. Fading as we leave it far behind, the planet is 280 million km away mid-month, so signals from the Mars spacecraft now take 15 minutes to reach us

**JUPITER AND SATURN** : Jupiter and Saturn have now come round the sun and appear in the morning sky for the next several months. Saturn rises before 1 a.m. mid-month, appearing as a medium bright ‘star’ with a creamy tint in an empty part of the sky. Jupiter rises around 2 a.m, the brightest 'star' in the morning sky, a gold colour. By dawn the two planets are midway up the northeast sky. Both are worth a look in any telescope.

<https://www.stardome.org.nz/astronomy/star-charts/> and <https://www.rasnz.org.nz/in-the-sky/the-evening-sky>