The March Night Sky

There are no naked-eye planets to see in the evening sky this month. Instead, Orion (the hunter) is the dominant feature of the north-north-western sky. As the evenings pass the stars of his belt become increasingly vertical, pointing down through Taurus (the bull), to Matariki, and up to brilliant Sirius of Canis Major (the big dog).

Overhead and in the northwest, Sirius is the brightest true star in the sky, both because it is relatively close, nine light years away, and because it is 23 times brighter than the sun.

Below Sirius, are bluish Rigel and orange Betelgeuse, the brightest stars in the constellation of Orion. Between these 2 is a line of 3 stars (Orion’s belt), that to us in the southern hemisphere, makes the bottom of 'The Pot'. The handle of ‘The Pot’, or Orion's sword, has the Orion Nebula at its centre; a glowing gas cloud many light-years across and 1300 light years away. It is a place where dust and gas in space is gathering together to make new stars. Some of the stars are much bigger and hotter than the Sun.

The constellation of Taurus is a V-shaped pattern of stars, making the face of the Bull, upside down to us.

Near the north skyline the stars Pollux and Castor mark the heads of Gemini the twins. Though paired in mythology, the two stars are not related at all. Castor is a hot white star like Sirius but 52 light years away. Golden Pollux is bigger and brighter but cooler than Sirius and 34 light years away. Above and right of them is the star cluster Praesepe, marking the shell of Cancer the crab. Praesepe is also called the Beehive cluster, the reason obvious when it is viewed in binoculars. It is some 500 light years from us.

Crux, the Southern Cross, is in the southeast, lying on its side. Below it 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.

The Milky Way is brightest in the southeast toward Crux. It becomes broader lower in the southeast toward Scorpius. Above Crux the Milky Way can be traced to nearly overhead where it fades. It becomes very faint in the north, right of Orion where we are looking toward the Galaxy's nearby edge. The centre of the Galaxy is in the broad part of the Milky Way in the southeast.

The Clouds of Magellan, LMC (large) and SMC (small) are high in the south sky. They are easily seen by eye on a dark moonless night, looking like misty patches. They are two small galaxies about 160 000 and 200 000 light years away. The LMC is around a quarter the mass of the Milky Way.

MERCURY: Well below and right of Venus (in the east), bright Mercury rises after 5am, close to Saturn. Mercury falls lower each day as it moves to the far side of the Sun. By mid-month Mercury doesn't appear till twilight.

VENUS: Venus rises due east after 3:30 am at the beginning of the month.

MARS: To the right of Venus, Mars is much fainter and red-coloured. By the end of March, Mars is above Venus.

JUPITER: If you have a low eastern skyline, or a sea horizon, then on the 31st you might see Jupiter rising after 6 a.m.

SATURN: Also well below and right of Venus. Saturn rises earlier each day, as we catch it up, By the end of March, Saturn is above Venus.

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