The February Night Sky

There are some key landmarks to find to begin learning about the summer sky. First look high in the north and find the three bright stars in a line, known as Tautoru or The Pot. These stars are Orion’s Belt, one of the most distinctive guides in the night sky.

Below Orion’s Belt is the bright orange star Pūtara or Betelgeuse, a massive star that is a supernova in waiting. And further below Orion, near the horizon you will see the Gemini Twins, Castor and Pollux. Directly above the Belt is Rigel or Puanga, another luminous supergiant star, which is much hotter and tinted blue.

Extend the line of the Belt stars to the right (east) to find Sirius or Takurua, the brightest star in the sky. Now extending the Belt line to the left (west) you will find the orange star, Taumatakuku or Aldebaran: this brightest star marks the bull’s eye in the constellation of Taurus. Continue that line further to the left and you will find the beautiful star cluster, the Pleiades or Matariki. The unaided eye might detect about 7 stars though many more are seen using binoculars

Following a line up through Orion towards the south brings you to Canopus, the second brightest star in the night sky after Sirius. Canopus or Atutahi, dominates our view overhead during the summer. It is the brightest star in the major southern constellation of Carina.

In the southeast we find Crux, the Southern Cross or Mahutonga. Below it are Beta and Alpha Centauri**,** often called The Pointers or Te Taura o te Punga.

Our galaxy, the Milky Way or Te Mangoroa**,** is brightest in the southeast toward Crux. It can be traced up the sky, fading where it is nearly overhead. It becomes very faint east, or right, of Orion. We are looking edgewise into the Milky Way galaxy, the pancake of billions of stars of which the sun is just one.

Above Crux the Diamond and False Crosses (Kaipatiki and Piawai) are easily spotted. The Diamond points to the Large Magellanic Cloud high in the south. A line from Crux (the Southern Cross) takes us up through the Small Cloud and on to Achernar.

The Large and Small Magellanic Clouds (LMC and SMC) are special features of the southern night sky. These dwarf galaxies are named after the Portuguese explorer, Ferdinand Magellan who first documented them. They can also be referred to as Pātari-rangi and Pātari-kaihau. These are the two closest galaxies to our much larger Milky Way Galaxy. For early evening viewing away from city lights on a moonless night, they are easily visible with the naked eye although they can be seen better using binoculars.

**MERCURY:** Until late February seen low in the eastern sky as the sky begins to brighten. This planet is a challenge to spot as it is never far from the sun’s glare.

**VENUS:** Inside earth, this planet is slowly catching up with us.It is visible shining brightly 70 mins after sunset, very low in the west. The thin crescent Moon will be alongside on the 22nd.

**MARS:** The planet is fading as we move further away.The red planet rises in the late summer evening’s northern sky, outshining its background stars. On the 28th the moon passes by Mars.

**JUPITER:** On the far side of the sun, falling from view. This golden planet sets more than two hours after the Sun in the west at the beginning of the month but sinks steadily lower night to night. At the end of February Jupiter will be near Venus. The thin crescent Moon will be above Jupiter on the 23rd.

**SATURN:** Hidden from view by the sun’s glare.

Compiled using notes from Alan Gilmore at Mt John Observatory and [Stardome’s Guide](https://www.stardome.org.nz/star-charts--sky-spotter)