The March Night Sky

Northwest of overhead is Takurua/Sirius, the brightest star in the sky. Southwest of the zenith is Atutahi/ Canopus, the second brightest. Below and left of Sirius are bluish Puanga/Rigel (a bluish supergiant) and orange Pūtara/Betelgeuse (a red-giant), bright stars in Orion. Between them is a line of three stars: Tautoru/Orion's belt, making the bottom of 'The Pot'. Above and left of Jupiter, in the northwest, is orange Te Kokota/Aldebaran. It is at one tip of an upside-down V, marking one eye in the face of Taurus the bull. Well left of Jupiter, and lower, is Matariki/Pleiades star cluster, setting after 10 pm, mid-month.

The handle of "The Pot", or Orion's sword, has the Orion Nebula at its centre, a vast glowing gas cloud where dust and gas in space are gathering together to make new stars.. It is easily seen in binoculars.

Due north, below and right of Mars, Whakaahu kerekere/ Pollux and Whakaahu rangi/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. Golden Pollux is bigger and brighter but cooler and closer than Sirius. Above and right of them is the Praesepe star cluster, marking the shell of Cancer the crab. Praesepe is also called the Beehive cluster, its shape clear in binoculars.

Māhutonga/ Crux, the Southern Cross, is in the southeast. Below it are Ranginui/Beta and Uruao/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.

Te Ikaroa/The Milky Way is brightest in the southeast toward Crux and 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 below Scorpius in the southeast.

The Ngā Pātari/ Clouds of Magellan, Larger and Smaller are high in the south sky. These two small galaxies are easily seen by eye on a dark moonless night, looking like misty patches.

The full Moon will rise totally eclipsed on the 14th. Being exactly opposite the Sun, the Moon rises at sunset. It starts to exit the dark inner part of Earth’s shadow, the umbra, at 8:31 pm and is fully out by 9:48. It

will still look a little odd till it leaves the fuzzy edge of the shadow, the penumbra, at 11:00. While often called a ‘blood Moon’, the colour at total eclipse can be anything from orange brown like a dried apricot to deep bronze. It all depends on how much cloud there is around the rim of the Earth as seen from the Moon.

All seven planets are visible in the first 2 weeks of March, rising in the east & setting in the west.

*Whiro/Mercury*: Visible low in the west at evening twilight, Mercury is bright enough to shine through the darkening sky.

*Kōpū/Venus*: This bright but thin crescent sets due west half an hour after the Sun. The very thin crescent Moon will be above Venus on the 2nd & the planet sinks into the twilight before passing between us and the Sun on the 23rd.

*Matawhero/Mars*: Orange Mars is due north at dusk, low in the sky and fading as we leave it behind. The Moon will be near Mars on the 8th and 9th.

*Kōpūnui/Jupiter*: Bright enough to be called the ‘evening star’, Jupiter appears in the northwest at early twilight. It sets after midnight at the beginning of the month and before 11 pm at the end. The Moon will be near Jupiter on the 6th.

*Rongo/Saturn*: Lying below Mercury in the west, Saturn is the most challenging planet to view and requires a telescope or good pair of binoculars and a clear view down to the western horizon. From the 23rd Earth passes through the ring plane of Saturn, making the rings essentially invisible. Over the next many years, the tilt of Saturn’s rings will slowly increase relative to our point of view.

*Rangipō/Uranus*: Visible in the northwest near Venus with modest binoculars. On the 4th, it will be visible just south of a waxing crescent Moon.

*Tangaroa/Neptune*: Lies just to the southeast of Mercury and also calls for a telescope.

Star groups and single stars are coloured at 1st mention

<https://www.rasnz.org.nz/in-the-sky/the-evening-sky/february-evening-sky-1> <http://www.pixieplots.co.nz/Maori-Star-Names> <https://cosmicpursuits.com/night-sky-this-month/>