The May Night Sky

As the sky darkens Takurua/Sirius appears midway down the western sky. It is the brightest true star and twinkles with all colours when setting in the southwest in the late evening. It is the ‘Dog Star', marking the head of Pukawanui/Canis Major the big dog, now head down, tail up. Atutahi/Canopus, the second brightest star, is southwest of overhead. Below Sirius are bluish Puanga/Rigel and reddish Pūtara/Betelgeuse, the brightest stars in Orion. Between them is a line of 3 stars, Tautoru/Orion's belt, making the bottom of 'The Pot', now tipped on its side.

Orange Ruawāhia/ Arcturus is the brightest star in the northern sky, rising in the northeast at dusk. It often twinkles red and green when low in the sky and is about 120 times brighter than the sun.

Māhutonga/Crux, the Southern Cross, is southeast of the zenith, to the right of 'The Pointers'. Uruao /Alpha Centauri, the brighter Pointer, is the closest naked-eye star, 4.3 light years away. Ranginui /Beta Centauri, like most of the stars in Crux, is a blue-giant star hundreds of light years away.

Te Māngōra/The Milky Way is brightest in the southeast toward Scorpius and Kaikōpere/Sagittarius. In a dark sky it can be traced up past the Pointers and Crux, fading toward Sirius. The Milky Way is our edgewise view of the galaxy, the pancake of billions of stars of which the sun is just one. The thick hub of the galaxy, 27 000 light-years away, is in Sagittarius. The nearby outer edge is by Orion where the Milky Way is faintest. A scan along the Milky Way with binoculars shows many clusters of stars and some glowing gas clouds, particularly in Carina and Scorpius.

Following the Milky Way down into the southeast finds Manaia ki te Rangi/Scorpius. Orange Rehua/ Antares marks the Scorpion's body. The scorpion's upside-down tail curves to the right of Antares. There is a Greek legend that the Scorpion and Orion were always fighting so a goddess put them on opposite sides of the sky, so they never appeared in the sky together. But in the southern hemisphere they do.

Ngā Pātari/The Clouds of Magellan, LMC and SMC, are midway down the southern sky, easily seen by eye on a dark moonless night. They are small galaxies about 200 000 light-years away. They are much smaller than our Milky Way Galaxy but there are many billions of stars in each.

Many meteors will be in the pre-dawn sky around May 5-7 as the Eta Aquarid meteor shower peaks. This is due to the earth passing through the debris from Halley’s comet Up to 30 meteors per hour might be seen before twilight, hitting the air at high speed and burning up

The visible planets rise in the east and set in the west

Whiro/Mercury: Mercury is a bright ‘star’ visible below Venus before sunrise, but slips lower over the month

Kōpū/Venus: Venus rises around 4 a.m. throughout May, a brilliant object in the dark morning sky. The Moon will be close to Venus around 9 a.m. on the 24th – a chance to find Venus by eye in the daylight.

Matawhero/Mars: Mars is 1 of 2 planets visible in the evening sky. It looks like an orange-red star low in the northwest. The Moon will be near Mars on the 4th.

Kōpūnui/Jupiter: This early ‘evening star’ appears soon after sunset. It sets before 8 pm at the beginning of the month and soon after 6pm at the end. The Moon will be to the right of Jupiter on the 1st

Rongo/Saturn: At the beginning of the month Saturn is a medium-bright ‘star’ above Venus. By the end of the month Saturn is well above and left of Venus but is the brightest ‘star’ in that region. Saturn presents an intriguing sight in a telescope because its rings are nearly edge-on to our point of view and appear as a pair of thin lines protruding from the planet’s limb. The Moon will be near Saturn on the morning of the 23rd

Tangaroa/Neptune: Far beyond both Venus and Saturn, Neptune is difficult to see in early May. By the end of May, Neptune stands close to the northeast of Saturn and can be spotted with a pair of binoculars, glowing fairly brightly in the morning before sunrise.

Star groups and single stars are coloured at 1st mention

<https://www.rasnz.org.nz/in-the-sky/the-evening-sky/april-evening-sky>

<http://www.pixieplots.co.nz/Maori-Star-Names>