

March night skies

Rich Heffern | Mar. 11, 2011 Eco Catholic

Aldebaran, the star that represents the "eye" of the constellation Taurus, the bull, is to the lower left of the Moon in early March. The star shines bright orange, indicating that its surface is thousands of degrees cooler



than the surface of the Sun. Cancer, the crab, is well up in the east at

nightfall and passes high overhead later on. Although it is part of the zodiac, its stars are dim. The brightest, Beta Cancri, is so faint you may not be able to see it from a suburb, let alone a city.

Virgo, the constellation most identified with spring, is entering prime evening viewing time. Most of its stars are relatively faint. But Virgo's brightest star, blue-white Spica, is easy to pick out. It rises in the east in mid-evening.

The largest and smallest planets in the solar system slide past each other the week of March 14. . Jupiter is the larger and brighter of the two. Mercury, the smallest planet, creeps up toward Jupiter, passes it , and pulls away later on.

The little planet Mercury is putting in its best evening sky appearance for the year this month. It is in the west at sunset and looks like a fairly bright star. On March 15, it's close to the right of much-brighter Jupiter. In mid-March, Look for the planet Mercury quite low in the west shortly after sunset. It looks like a fairly bright star. It is to the upper right of much brighter Jupiter, so it's easy to pluck from the fading evening twilight.

In mid-March, Regulus, the brightest star of Leo, the lion, stands to the upper left of the Moon as darkness falls. A curving pattern of stars that looks like a backwards question mark stretches to the upper left of Regulus.

We look up now, not into the plane of our home galaxy the Milky Way, as we do in the summer and fall, but out of the galaxy's plane and into the farther reaches of space. Thus innumerable galaxies -- celestial cities containing billions of stars -- are visible with a telescope beginning in March and continuing through early summer. Between the constellations Virgo and Leo is what is known as the Virgo cluster. In a telescope hundreds of galaxies can be seen in the eyepiece in this region. These galaxies are part of the vast local group that our galaxy, the Milky Way, belongs to.

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