February Skies

Venus and Jupiter will continue to dominate the early evening sky in the west. Venus continues its climb into the western sky while Jupiter progressively sets a little earlier each evening. At magnitude -4.3, Venus will dazzle us, being almost twice as bright as magnitude -2.2 Jupiter.

Mercury, at magnitude -1, appears low in the early evening sky on the 22nd. During the next 6 days it climbs into the western sky reaching 10 degrees above the horizon by the 28th. Look to the western horizon about 30 minutes after sunset. To find it on the 22nd, look below and to the right of Venus. You can also use the old trick of extending your arm and making a fist. Mercury should be slightly less than 3 fist widths below Venus. A good pair of binoculars will also help. One fist width equals approximately 10 degrees. This holds true for everybody because of the ratio of arm’s length to fist size.

Mars charges dramatically into the evening sky in the east. At the beginning of the month it rises at 8:30 p.m. By month’s end it will rise as early as 6 p.m. During February it will almost double in magnitude from -0.5 to -1.2. As it approaches opposition to the sun in early March, surface features will require a small telescope to discern. This is because Mars is approaching aphelion in its orbit (farthest distance from the Sun).

One of the best telescopic and binocular sights this month will be the mighty ringed planet Saturn. This month you will want to concentrate on the rings as they are now tilted 15 degrees from edge on. At this angle the Cassini division in the rings should be easy to spot. Don’t miss this opportunity as the rings will close slightly over the next 4 or 5 months. At the beginning of the month it will rise around 11:30 p.m. and will rise at 9:30 p.m. by month’s end. Its magnitude will brighten from +0.6 to +0.4.

The Moon will be full on the 7th, last quarter on the 14th, new on the 21st and first quarter on the 29th. Yes, that’s right, the 29th! 2012 is divisible by 4 making this a leap year!

On the 9th, a nearly full Moon will rise above the eastern horizon just to the right of and at about the same as the red planet Mars. Look east between 8 and 9 p.m. Looking west on the 22nd, about 30 minutes after sunset, an ultra thin crescent Moon will be found just above the horizon and to the left of Mercury. By the 24th the Moon will have risen to a position below and slightly to the right of Venus.

On the 25th and 26th, shortly after dark, the crescent Moon will visit Venus and then Jupiter in the western sky. From there it will continue on to pass both the Pleiades and Hyades (Taurus) clusters on the 25th and 26th.

Clear Skies!

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