March Skies

March starts with a fine apparition of Mercury lasting from the 1st through the 10th. The best viewing will be on the 1st through the 4th. Looking west-southwest, about an hour after sunset Mercury, at magnitude -0.5, will appear about 30 degrees (three fist widths) below and slightly to the right of Venus.

Throughout the month mighty Jupiter and dazzling Venus will draw ever closer together until they pass each other on the night of March 12-13. This will also afford you the opportunity to make a comparison of apparent visual magnitudes. As they pass, Venus at magnitude -4.3 is nearly double the brightness of Jupiter shining at magnitude -2.2.

If you can find a really dark location, there is another elusive sight to look for during the early evening hours. From the 10th through the 24th look due west about 90 minutes after sunset. Rising from the horizon, like a faint glowing pyramid of light, will be the Zodiacal Light. This glowing pyramid is caused by sunlight reflecting off of dust particles in space that trail in the Earth’s orbit and seemingly align with the zodiac. It should be seen passing up through Venus, Jupiter and the Pleiades.

Mars reaches opposition from the Sun on the 3rd meaning that it will rise in the east at sunset and be visible in the sky all night long. At magnitude -1.2 it has just past aphelion and is 63 million miles from Earth, the farthest opposition since 1995.

Saturn rises about 4 hours after sunset in early March and only about one hour after sunset by the end of the month. Although slowly closing the rings are still well suited for observations with binoculars or small telescopes. It can be found near the bright star Spica in Virgo.

The Moon will be full on the 8th, last quarter on the 14th, new on the 22nd and first quarter on the 30th. On March 7th a nearly full Moon will rise above the eastern horizon just below the red planet Mars. Look for the pair about 45 minutes after sunset.

Looking west on the 25th and 26th, the crescent Moon will pass close to Jupiter on the 25th and Venus on the 26th. Look for both events about an hour after sunset.

Daylight savings fans should look forward to Sunday, March 11 when daylight savings time returns for most of North America and Canada. Spring forward by remembering to set your clocks ahead one hour. March 19-20 brings us the equinox marking the first day of spring for the northern hemisphere and the first day of fall for our friends south of the equator. This will occur at 1:14 a.m. EDT on the 20th and 10:14 PDT on the 19th.

Clear Skies!

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