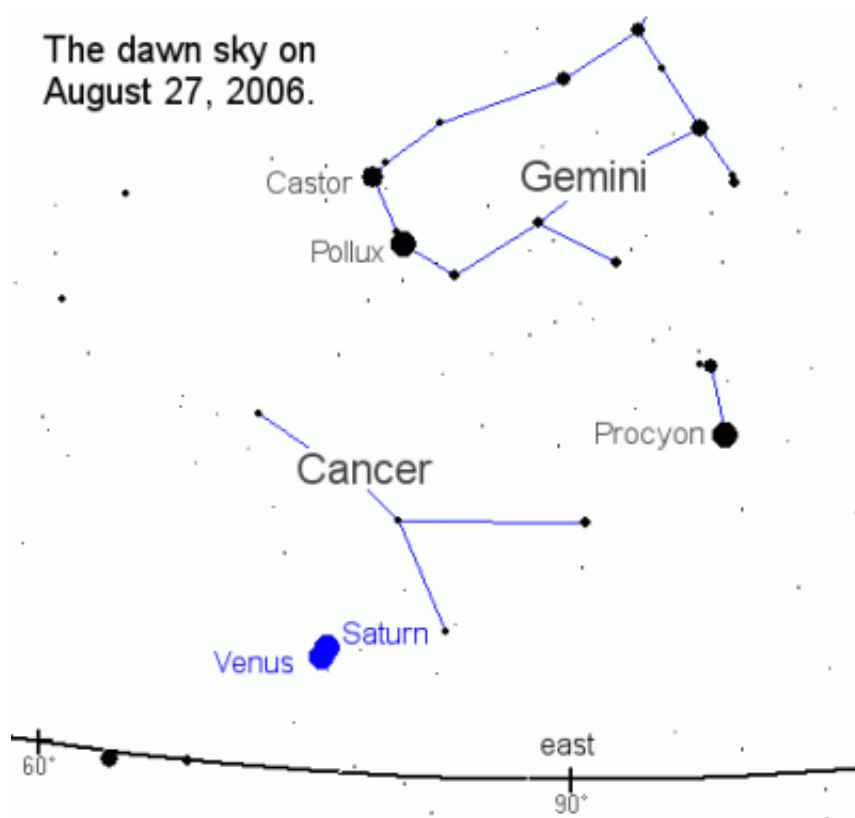


Martian Misinformation

August 25 2006



On Sunday, August 27th, Mars will be far from Earth, dim and unremarkable. In short, a total bore. That's news? It is when a widely-read email claims just the opposite.

Perhaps you've seen it:

"The Red Planet is about to be spectacular."

"Earth is catching up with Mars [for] the closest approach between the two planets in recorded history."

"On August 27th ... Mars will look as large as the full moon."

"NO ONE ALIVE TODAY WILL EVER SEE THIS AGAIN."

This is called the "Mars Hoax" and, as the name suggests, it is false.

If Mars ever came close enough to Earth to rival the Moon, it would alter Earth's orbit and raise fantastic tides. Impossible: The orbits of Earth and Mars are too far apart. In fact, this month Mars is about as far from Earth as it can get: 385 million km, all the way on the other side of the Solar System.

The Hoax first appeared in 2003. On August 27th of that year, Mars really did come historically close to Earth: 56 million km. But even then the e-mail's claim that Mars would rival the Moon was grossly exaggerated. To the unaided eye, Mars looked like a bright red star, nothing more. In every August since 2003, the email has staged a revival.

If you want to see something truly astronomical on August 27th, wake up before dawn on Sunday and look east. Venus and Saturn are having a close encounter, as shown in the sky map, above. The two planets will be stationed less than half-a-degree apart in the rosy glow of the rising sun. Suggestion: Take your binoculars out with you. Venus is intense, but Saturn is easily lost in the brightening dawn. Binoculars help, and both planets can be seen at once through typical optics--very pretty.

Meanwhile, Mars is a bore. Spread the word.

Source: Science@NASA, by Dr. Tony Phillips

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