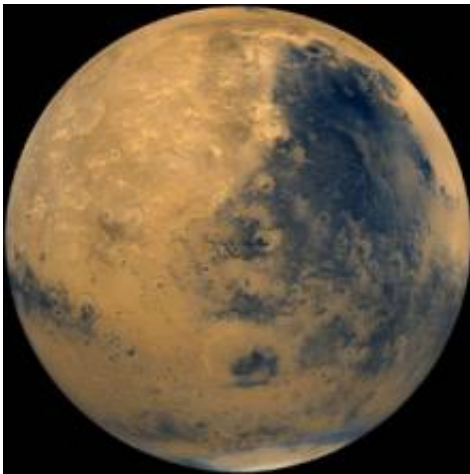


STAR TRAK for February: Mars puts on its best show

February 1 2010



Mars. Image: NASA

(PhysOrg.com) -- Mars will be at its highest and brightest for the year during February, coming into view in the east as evening twilight fades. The red planet was closest to Earth in its orbit on Jan. 27, and it will remain near its best all month as it outshines every star except Sirius.

This will be a fine opportunity to view Mars through a telescope, since it won't be bigger or brighter until 2014. The best views will be shortly before midnight, when Mars will be highest in the south and its light will pass through less of Earth's distorting atmosphere.

On the night of Feb. 6-7, [Mars](#) will pass near the bright Beehive star

cluster. They will be close for several nights before and after that, a particularly fine sight in binoculars.

Saturn will rise in the east around 9:30 p.m. local time at the beginning of February and two hours earlier at month's end. It will remain in view the rest of the night, reaching its highest point in the south after midnight. The tilt of its rings will narrow slightly this month, but they will open wider to our view after that. Saturn's largest moon, the planet-sized Titan, can be seen with any telescope on a clear night. See [nasa.gov/home/index.cfm](https://www.nasa.gov/home/index.cfm) target="_blank">saturn.jpl.[nasa.gov/home/index.cfm](https://www.nasa.gov/home/index.cfm) for the latest news and images from the [Cassini spacecraft](#) orbiting [Saturn](#).

[Jupiter](#) and Venus will change places low in the west-southwest after sunset as February advances. Binoculars will probably be needed to see them in the bright glow of twilight. At the beginning of the month, Venus will still be too close to the sun to spot, but Jupiter will be visible. Each evening Venus will be a little higher and Jupiter a little lower, and on Feb. 16 they will pass just a half degree apart. Jupiter will be to the upper right of much brighter Venus. By month's end Jupiter will be lost in the solar glare, but Venus will be fairly easy to see a half hour after sunset.

Mercury will be very low in the southeast a half hour before sunrise during the first week of February. It will appear even lower each morning, and observers in the Northern Hemisphere will lose sight of it in the brightening sky in the second week. Those watching in the Southern Hemisphere will have a better view.

Zodiacal light

If you live in an area that is dark enough for you to see the Milky Way sprawling across the night sky, you also have a chance of seeing the

interplanetary dust in the plane of our solar system. Find an open area with no light pollution or moonlight. After sunset as darkness falls, look for a faint pyramid of light spreading upward from the western horizon over a large area of the sky. This is the zodiacal light, which is sunlight reflected from microscopic debris left behind by comets and asteroids that orbit the sun in the same plane as the planets. An example can be seen at www.astrophoto.com/ZodiacalLight.jpg .

Moon phases

The moon will be at third quarter on Feb. 5, new on Feb. 13, at first quarter on Feb. 21 and full on Feb. 28.

Provided by Indiana University

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