

STAR TRAK for February 2012

February 2 2012



Credit: NASA

As evening twilight fades during February, the two brightest planets, Venus and Jupiter, will highlight the sky as they come into view in the southwest.

The best time to observe brilliant Venus with a telescope will be during twilight. The brightness of the [sky](#) will reduce the planet's glare, and it will be higher above the horizon than when the sky is completely dark, so its image will be sharper. It will set around 8:30 p.m. local time at the start of the month and an hour later by month's end. Venus and the crescent moon will make a lovely pair after sunset on Feb. 25, when they will be only 3 degrees apart.

Venus will serve as a guide for locating [Uranus](#) between Feb. 3 and 15, when the two planets will be in the same field of view through 7x50 binoculars. On Feb. 9 they will pass just 0.3 degrees apart, and a telescope at low power will show both at once. Venus will be about 10,000 times brighter than blue-green Uranus.

Higher in the southwestern sky after sunset will be the huge planet Jupiter, the second-brightest point of light in the sky. It won't set until midnight, so there will be plenty of time for viewing with a telescope.

Mars will rise around 9 p.m. local time at the start of the month and a few minutes after sunset at month's end. The red-orange planet will nearly double in brightness during February, appearing as the brightest object in the [constellation Leo](#) the Lion as it heads toward opposition during the first week of March. This month is the time to observe Mars through a telescope. The white north [polar cap](#) should be visible as the planet's [north pole](#) tips in our direction.

About three hours after Mars rises, Saturn will appear above the eastern horizon. The yellow-orange object will be visible by midnight local time at the beginning of February and two hours earlier by month's end. It will be highest in the south shortly before [morning twilight](#) begins, the best time for viewing with a telescope. Saturn will be slightly brighter than the bright white star Spica to its right (west). Its spectacular rings will be tilted 15 degrees to our line of sight at mid-month.

Saturn's largest moon, the planet-sized Titan, can be seen with any telescope on a clear night. Titan will be north of Saturn on Feb. 7 and 23 and south of the planet on Feb. 15. See saturn.jpl.nasa.gov/home/index.cfm for the latest news and images from the Cassini spacecraft orbiting Saturn.

Mercury will pass behind the sun on Feb. 7, emerging into the early

evening sky soon after. By Feb. 22, it will be easy to spot near the western horizon in evening twilight a half-hour after sunset. It will continue to move upward until the end of the month, when it will set an hour after the sun.

Moon phases

The moon will be full on Feb. 7, at third quarter on Feb. 14, new on Feb. 21 and at first quarter on Feb. 29.

Provided by Indiana University

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