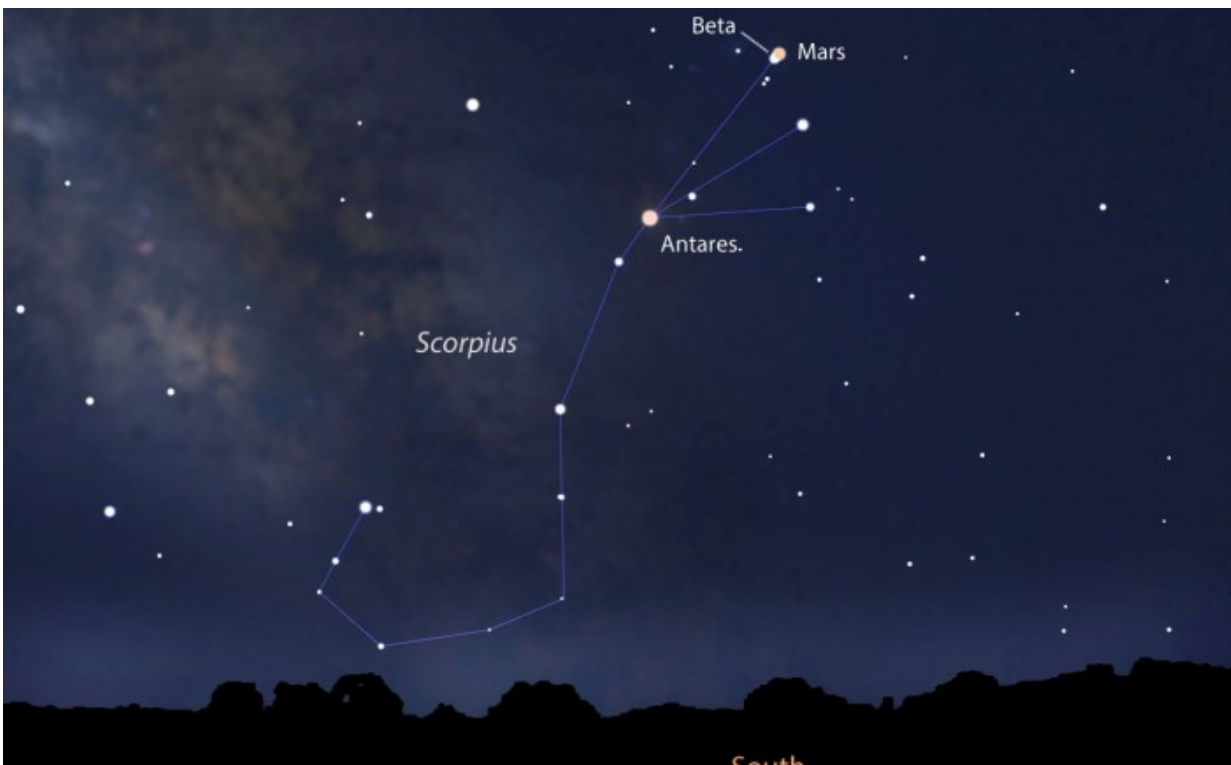


Stunning conjunction of Mars and Beta Scorpii this week

March 15 2016, by Bob King

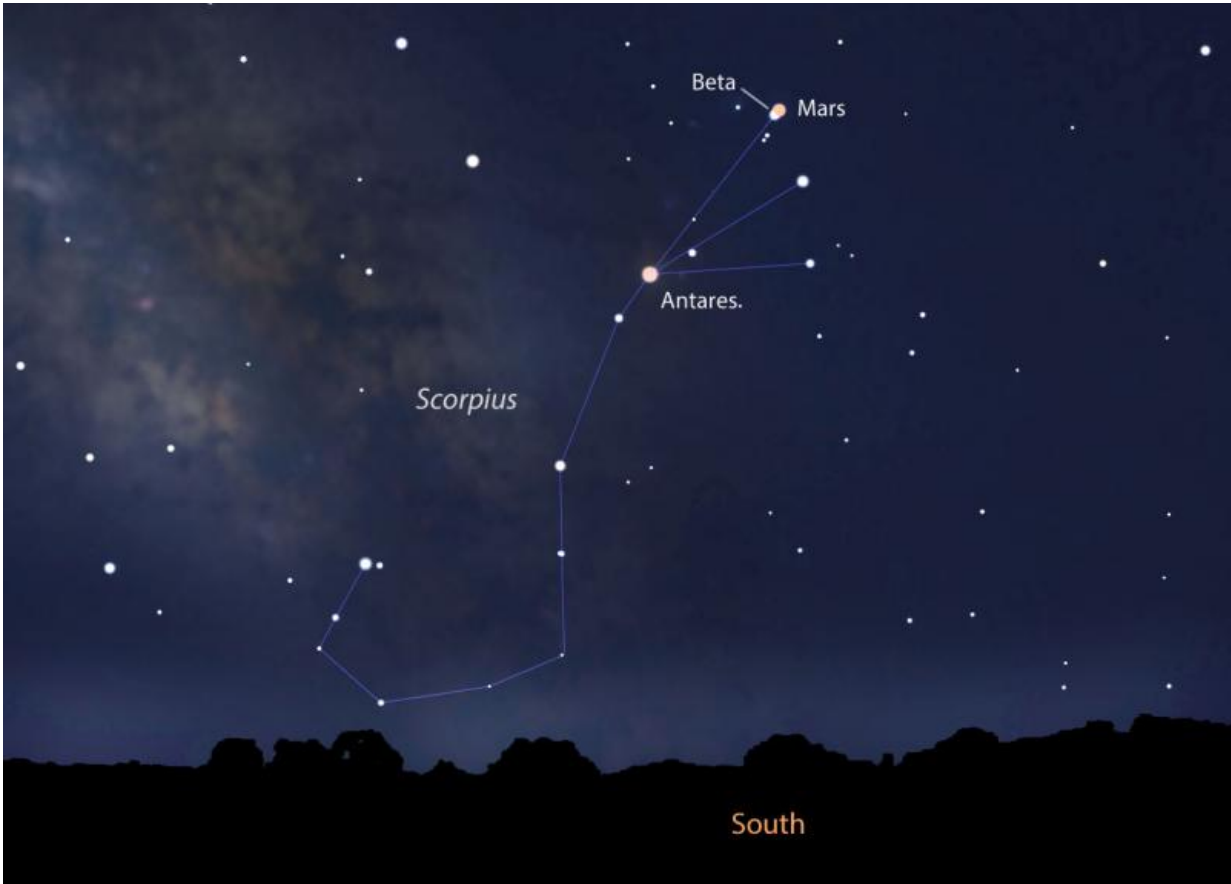


Planets can sneak up on you. Especially the ones that don't rise till you're in bed. Take Mars for instance. It's been ambling east along the morning zodiac all winter long; today it enters Scorpius, rising around 1:30 a.m. Not two days later, the planet will have a spectacularly close

conjunction with Beta Scorpii, the topmost star in the scorpion's head.

Also known as Graffias, Beta shines at magnitude +2.6 next to the fiery, zero-magnitude Mars. With their striking color contrast, the two would make a superb ring setting: a tiny diamond nestled next to a plump garnet. They'll be together for several mornings, their separation changing each day: 15 arc minutes on Tuesday (1/2 the diameter of the Full Moon); 9 arc minutes when closest on Wednesday and back out to 23 minutes on Thursday.

It's a gas to see two celestial objects approach so closely, but this conjunction offers a rare treat. Did you know that Beta is one of the finest double stars in the sky? It has a fifth magnitude companion 14 arc seconds northeast of the primary. Any telescope will split this jewel and show Mars in the same field of view at both high and low magnifications. That's just so cool—I sure hope you'll get to see them.



Face south tomorrow morning at the start of dawn and you might have to look twice for Beta Scorpii. Bright Mars stands right next to the star and will pass very close to the star on Wednesday morning, March 16. Credit: Bob King, source: Stellarium

Mars now measures 10 arc seconds in diameter, small for sure, but big enough to see the larger dark markings and a hint of the north polar cap. The planet is heading for opposition on May 22nd, when it will shine at magnitude -2.0 (brighter than Sirius) with a disk 18.4 arc seconds across, its biggest and closest since 2005.

Let this week's lovely conjunction serve as a warm-up to the forthcoming season of Mars.



This close up of the head of Scorpius shows Mars' progress over the next three mornings. Positions are shown for 5:30 a.m. CDT. Credit: Bob King, source: Stellarium



In a telescope, diminutive Mars pairs up with gorgeous Graffias. North is up and left. Beta-1, the brighter of the two, has an additional 10th magnitude companion half an arc-second away, while Beta-2 is also double with a faint companion 1/10th of arc second distant. That's not all. Beta-1 is an exceedingly close binary — making Graffias at least a five-star system! Credit: Bob King , source: Stellarium

Source: [Universe Today](#)

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