

MARCH 2010 ASTRONOMY

From the Trackman Planetarium at Joliet Junior College

The Vernal Equinox - first day of spring - is on March 20th. On that day, the sun appears to cross the celestial equator - an imaginary line in the sky that is directly above the earth's equator - and the amount of daylight and night is equal. Actually, due to orbital dynamics, the "equal day and night" is on March 18th. After the Vernal Equinox, the farther north you travel, the more daylight there is in a twenty-four hour period. At the North Pole, the sun rises and stays above the horizon until September. If you drive east in the morning or west in the evening, bring sunglasses with you because the sun will rise or set directly in your field of vision.

On March 14th, we change to Daylight Saving Time. Move your clocks ahead one hour. The good news is the sun will then set at 6:55 PM. The bad news is the sun goes back to rising a few minutes after 7:00 AM - but for less than one week. If we didn't make this time change, the sun would rise at 4:20 AM next June. Dawn would be at 3:30 AM!

Because of the time change at mid-month, objects will cross the sky one hour later by our clocks. And, the sun adds another 55 minutes to its setting time during March. So sunset is almost two hours later at the end of March than on March 1st.

When the skies turn dark, look high in the sky for the bright red planet, Mars. We are orbiting away from Mars, but even at month's end Mars will still be very bright. Above, and slightly to the left of Mars is the Big Dipper. The two bright stars above and to the right of Mars mark the heads of the Gemini twins. They are Castor and Pollux. If you have binoculars, look to the immediate left of Mars and find the open cluster of stars called the Beehive Cluster. The Beehive is in the constellation of Cancer, but the stars in Cancer are too dim to be seen in our light pollution. Orion is still high in the southwestern skies.

At month's end, Venus will be in the western sky right after sunset. On March 31st, look slightly to the left of Venus and you might be able to see Mercury. Use a pair of binoculars if you have them - but only after the sun has set. Venus will continue to set later each night until it will be a very bright object in the western sky on summer evenings.

Saturn is back in the evening skies. At mid-month, look for the yellow "star" in the eastern sky after sunset. On March 28th, Saturn will be above and to the left of the moon. Saturn is the most amazing of all the planets in a telescope. The rings are so impressive; we are often accused of having put a picture inside the eyepiece to fool people. Unfortunately, Saturn is on an angle toward the earth this summer and the rings will almost disappear. March will be the best viewing of Saturn's rings until next fall.

The full moon is on March 30th. The sun starts the month in Aquarius, and on March 12th the sun moves into Pisces where it remains for the rest of March.

On March 6th, Joliet Junior College will sponsor “This is JJC”, a chance for interested students and their parents to visit the campus and talk with professors and administrators about what Joliet Junior College has to offer. There will be representatives available to talk with you about classes, costs and scholarships. There are also guided tours of the campus and the planetarium will be open for mini-sky tours.

At 1:00 PM on March 6th, the Kankakee Area Stargazers Astronomy Club will be meeting in our planetarium. The Kankakee Club is one of several astronomy clubs in the area. The Kankakee Club normally meets at the Strickler Planetarium at Olivet Nazarene University. This meeting is open to the public and if you have an interest in pursuing astronomy as a hobby, you will probably find the meeting interesting and educational. Membership in an astronomy club gives an excellent advantage to the amateur astronomer. Club members are good sources of information on equipment and how to use the equipment. At Star Parties - amateur astronomer campouts in dark sky areas - club members become friends with whom you can share the camping experience.

Our public shows at the planetarium are:

Young people’s shows at 6:30 PM on March 4th “We Go To The Moon” and March 18th “Our Solar System”. Regular shows are at 7:30 PM on March 9th “Skies of March” and March 23rd “The World Will Not End On December 21st, 2012”.

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