

MARCH 2011 ASTRONOMY

From the Trackman Planetarium at Joliet Junior College

The Vernal Equinox- the beginning of spring - is at 5:20 pm on March 20th. (There are some who will say that winter doesn't end until April 30th.) On the first day of spring, the sun is directly over the equator and it will appear to move upward in the sky until June 21st - the summer solstice. The sun appears to move up and down in the sky because of the Earth's 23.5 degree tilt. As we orbit the sun, it is similar to riding a tilt-a-whirl at the carnival. On the equinox, the sun rises directly east and sets directly west and the hours of daylight and night are supposed to be equal. However, due to orbital dynamics, the closest to equal daylight and night is on the 18th. From the equinox until next September, the farther north you go, the more sunlight you have each day. At the north pole, they begin 24 hours of sunlight every day.

On March 13th, we change to Daylight Saving Time. Move the clocks forward one hour. If we didn't change the time, by June the sun would be rising at 4:21 am and twilight would start at 3:30 am. At mid-March, because of the time change, the sun sets at 6:55 pm.

During March, we lose Jupiter into the sun's glare. Jupiter will appear to pass behind the sun during the first week in April and then will become a morning planet. Jupiter will be back in the evening sky in late summer. Meanwhile, Saturn is in the evening sky - rising at 8:30 pm on March 1st. Because of the time change, Saturn will rise one hour later (by our clocks) and won't be a mid-evening object until the end of March. Orion is still the major constellation in the evening sky at mid-March. March will be your last chance to view the Orion Nebula with your binoculars. Look for the nebula under Orion's belt. If you follow the three stars of Orion's belt down and to the left, you come to the brightest star in the sky - Sirius. Sirius marks the nose of Canis Major, the big dog. The Big Dipper is high in the sky during March and will remain there for most of the summer. Below the Big Dipper is the constellation of Leo the Lion. Leo looks like a backward question mark and the bright star Regulus marks the bottom of the lion's head. To the east and above Orion are two bright stars - Pollux and Castor - that mark the heads of the Gemini twins. Between Gemini and Leo is the constellation of Cancer - the crab. Unless you have very dark skies, you can't see the stars of Cancer, but if you search the area with binoculars, you will find a cluster of stars known as the Beehive Cluster. High in the northwest sky is a "W" which is the constellation of Cassiopeia. Venus is still the bright object in the eastern sky before sunrise. Mars has slipped behind the sun and won't be visible until late spring. Look to the west after sunset on March 22nd, you should be able to spot the elusive Mercury. It sets an hour and 40 minutes after sunset. Jupiter will be between Mercury and the sun.

The full moon during March is on the 19th. The common name for this moon is "The Worm Moon" because it is the time of the year when the earthworms come up from the Earth. And that means the robins will be there waiting for them.

Discover JJC is on March 5th from 9 am until noon. Come to Discover JJC (Open House) and see what college is all about! Take a closer look at the many things that Joliet Junior College offers and find out how easy it is to start your bachelor's degree. Learn about our 100+ academic programs, meet with JJC faculty and staff and learn more about your areas of interest. Representatives from campus departments will provide you with information on how to get started at JJC, apply for admission, work through the financial aid process and learn about the many scholarships that are available. Be sure to stop by the planetarium for a brief star show.

The March shows at the planetarium are: March 1st at 7:30 pm (*Seasonal Skies*), March 10th at 6:30 pm (*Seasonal Skies for Young People*), March 15th at 7:30 pm (*Our Solar System*), March 24th at 6:30 pm (*The Earth Will Not End on 12-21-2012*), March 29th at 7:30 pm (*The Fermi Paradox*). Weather permitting, we will go out and take a look at the real sky after each planetarium show.

We are often asked, "How old is the planetarium?" The first show using the Spitz projector was on February 15th, 1973. In 1988, a generous donation by Herbert Trackman, a 1931 graduate of JJC, made possible the refurbishing of the planetarium and the installation of state-of-the-art audio and visual projection system. In 2008, new seating and carpeting was installed in the planetarium through the generosity of the JJC Foundation.

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