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THE STARRY SIDE Swinging Milky Way

BY GREELEY WELLS

We're just in the autumnal equinox as I write this in September, the mid-point between summer and winter's longest and shortest days. These nights the Milky Way, our galaxy, is running north to south with the Northern Cross on its side overhead in the middle of it. By the time you read this the galaxy will be almost diagonal across the sky north/east to south/west. By mid winter it will be east/west, a startling counter clockwise swing through the night sky. By this end point Orion will be leaping up while lying down in the eastern sky and later in December even Sirius, the dog star should be rising following Orion, our old favorites of the winter.

Now here's something: you can have a sneak preview of all this in one sleepless night or a few nights if you like. Just after the sky is dark go out and check it. You will see the Milky Way somewhere between north/south and towards diagonal. By midnight it will surely be diagonal and by predawn you will see the mid-winter sky with the east/west orientation of the Milky Way replete with the Northern Cross almost perfectly upright on or near the western horizon! The next season's constellations are always in our predawn sky. The later you try this the further along will be the procession. With a winter look you'll see into spring with further counterclockwise turning of the Milky Way till it's south/east to north/west and eventually north to south again: full circle!

This counter clockwise swinging of the Milky Way helps you to understand the strange movement of the sky above us. It is not just a simple east to west overhead swing but some sort of counter clockwise turning also. I'm still trying to figure out this complicated movement but it sure is beautiful. It's very complication adds much to its beauty and mystery.

P.S. Anyone notice my mistake last issue? Anybody reading this column? The meteors appear to fan out *from* the radiant in the east, not towards it! Sorry. Gee, I guess I'm not perfect after all.... shucks.

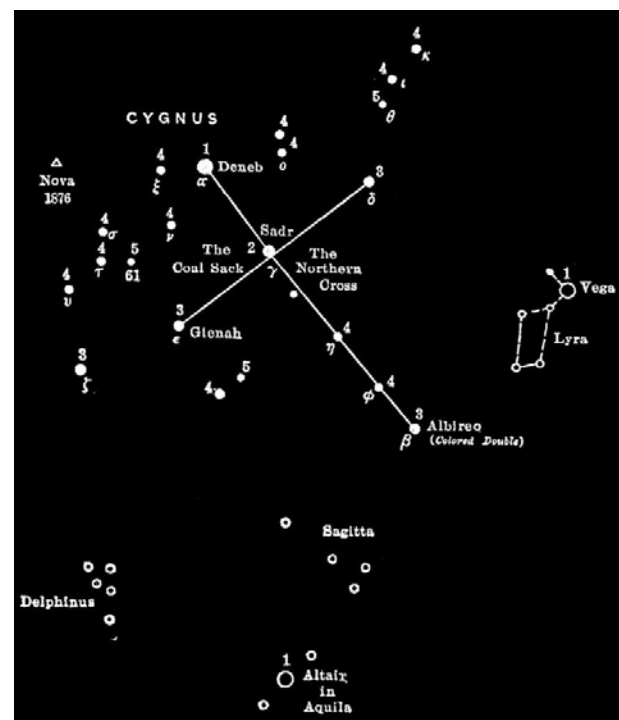
The Planets

Venus and Jupiter dance for several hours in the southwestern November sky after the sun sets, then they set as well. With them are Antares and the moon on October 31 and November 1-3, as well as November 29, 30 and December 1 when Antares will have already set. In December Venus and Jupiter get even closer, side by side on December 1 with a crescent moon near by. Venus passes Jupiter and continues to rise as Jupiter falls to the horizon.

Here's something interesting: on New Year's night the very bright Venus has the crescent moon to it's upper right, a final show for the parting old year's last evening.

Jupiter as mentioned above is left or south of Venus in November. Jupiter heads for the horizon line as the days pass and Venus rises higher. In December watch the dance change as Jupiter falls into the horizon by month's end passing Mercury both low in the sky, side by side on the 31. But on the 28 there's a tiny sliver moon joining them, if you've got a good southwestern horizon view.

Saturn rises after 1 am and by dawn is almost overhead in November. At dawn with some light in the sky with it, Saturn is in a perfect exposure for your telescope. Something bright is hard to see over a very dark sky. The rings are almost on edge. Notice the shadows of both the rings on the planet and the shadow of the planet on the rings.



Photos: Top—Northern Cross, www.gutenberg.com
Bottom—Milky Way, www.bigcigarastronomy.com

Mercury is basically invisible. It's very low early in November and then disappears into the sun, joining Mars which we cannot see at that time.

Of Special Note

On the first Sunday of November, the second, change your clocks back one hour from daylight-savings back to Standard Time. Officially the 1-2 am hour is repeated. The mnemonic is: "Spring forward, Fall back."

The Taurid meteors are very favorable this year between November 5-12. A swarm is possible this year and the radiant (where they appear to radiate from) is up all night.

Try to look when the moon is less, or down. Predawn is always recommended but any time will work.

The Geminid meteor showers peak during the predawn hours of December 14. Try to avoid the full moon, which will interfere with your viewing of the meteor showers.

The **moon** for November is full on the November 13. Look for it just north of the Pleiades. This moon is called the Hunter's Moon, Frosty Moon, or Beaver Moon and the December 12 moon is called the Noon Before Yule or the Long Night Moon.

During November and December the great square of Pegasus rises to be almost overhead. The Pleiades and Taurus are up in the east and the Northern Cross is almost perfectly upright in the west with the now east/west Milky Way.

The winter solstice is Sunday, December 21. These are our shortest days and longest nights (about 14 hours!), bundle up! Although a bit confusing, our coldest temperatures are yet to come! Go figure.

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