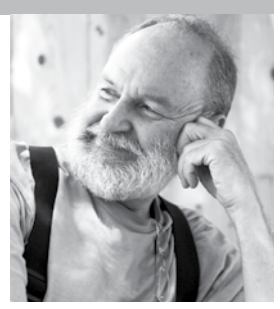
THE STARRY SIDE

Space and time

BY GREELEY WELLS



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One reason I love all the seasons is that by the end of each one, I'm looking forward to the next one.

Another reason is the way the seasons play with space—on our own planet and beyond. Our planet Earth is constantly spinning at 1,000 miles per hour. At the same time, it's traveling around the sun at 67,000 miles per hour, which we all know takes a year as we move through four seasons. At the same time, the sun is in orbit, too, around the Milky Way's Galactic Center, at a rate of 500,000 miles per hour. And the Milky Way itself is 100,000 light-years across! (A light-year is the distance light travels in a whole year.) And! it takes us 240 million years—960 million seasons—to make one round inside our galaxy.

So, what does our sky look like this season? The Spring Triangle rises in the east until it's overhead; in summer it will slowly begin setting in the west. It's made up of three great, bright stars:

1. Regulus is first to rise in March and the highest. To find Regulus, look north along the Big Dipper's upper two stars, then follow that line to the east quite a ways.

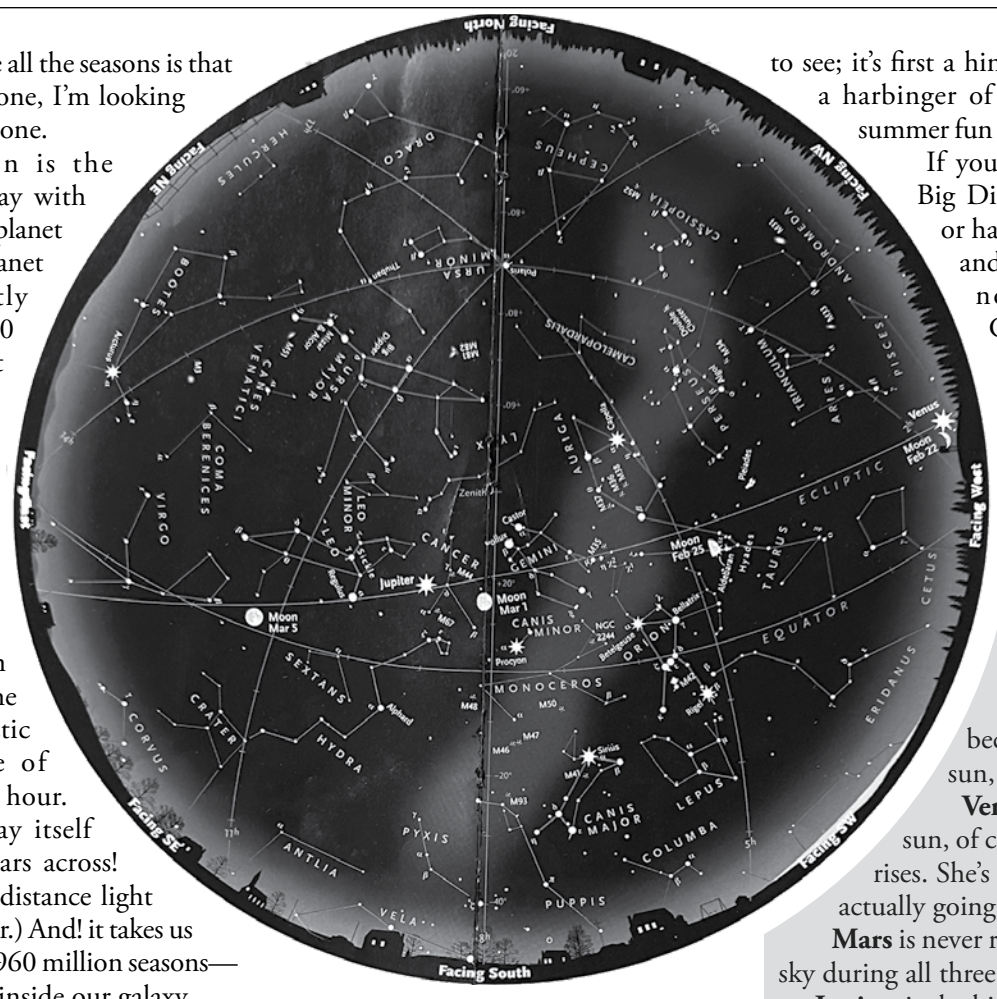

Image: Sky & Telescope (skyandtelescope.org).

2. Next, follow the arch of the Big Dipper's handle to Arcturus**,** the second star in the triangle.

3. Then look farther to the right and a little downwards to find bright Spica, the triangle's third star. (These last two rise later than Regulus.) This triangle is easy to see; it's first a hint at spring and then a harbinger of warm weather and summer fun as it swings overhead.

If you've noticed how the Big Dipper is on its "tail," or handle, completely up-and-down in the north, now you can find Cassiopeia opposite the North Star. Both the Big Dipper and Cassiopeia move, with all the other stars, counterclockwise: when you're looking north, they all rise in the east and set in the west. You'll see the Dipper on top of the North Star and Cassiopeia below in a while.

And notice how high the North Star is from our place on the planet. The farther north you are, the higher it is in the sky. Conversely, in the southern hemisphere, the southern pole star, Polaris Australis, gets higher in the sky the farther south you are. Now imagine being on the equator. The north star and Australis sit right on the horizon lines!

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— OF NOTE —

Planets

Mercury is the closest planet to the sun, but not the brightest because he's so small. Look for Mercury at dusk in March, near the sun, and also in May—but he's out of sight in April.

Venus, almost always our brightest "star" (planet), is also close to the sun, of course, so, like Mercury, is seen only after or before the sun sets or rises. She's too close to the sun for us to see in March (from our view, she's actually going behind the sun), April, and May. I'm trying not to cry.

Mars is never really bright but who else is so red? She's in the beautiful morning sky during all three months: March, April, and May.

Jupiter is the biggest planet, and often the brightest, to go around the sun. He's so big that 1,300 Earths could fit in him! Look for him at dusk in April and dawn in June, but not in May.

Saturn is only a medium-bright planet and can be almost anywhere. In March, April, and May, he's in our morning skies.

Meteors

The Lyrids in April and the Eta Aquariid meteor shower in May will be seriously marred by a southern-hemisphere orientation. Even the June Arietids peak during the morning. Daytime is not a good time to watch meteors. So forget them this season. This happened last year too! Sorry.

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