

THE STARRY SIDE

Starry spring sky

BY GREELEY WELLS

During spring we're standing on the Milky Way! It's all around our horizon line, going below our feet and out of sight. So there's a paucity of stars in large parts of the sky. But two huge constellations (and a handful of smaller ones) thrill us this season.

The first is the Big Dipper, which is at its highest in the north. If you follow the 'pointer stars' down from the outer edge of the Big Dipper, you'll find Polaris (the North Star, which is the end of the Little Dipper's handle). Go farther down, and you'll see Cassiopeia. The Big Dipper, whose formal name is really Ursa (bear) Major, is our first large spring constellation.

Now to find our second large constellation, look in the other direction: overhead. Find those same 'pointer stars' at the outside edge of the Big Dipper and this time follow them upwards. That large

That's the "foot" of Bootes, a kite-like shape going towards the north. (By the way, that's bright Saturn below and Spica to the left.) Between Leo and Arcturus is a very faint fuzzy area, but we Applegaters should have a dark enough sky to see it. That fuzzy area is Coma Berenices (the hair of queen Bernice). It wasn't always called this; it used to be the fuzzy end of the long tail of Leo until some priests, who needed to impress their king to get out of trouble, renamed the tail in honor of the queen, who was famous for her hair. Now continue looking in the same direction past Arcturus, and you'll see another faint but beautiful constellation come into view: Corona Borealis. It's a semicircle, or a backwards "C" or "U" depending on your orientation to it. Corona means crown in Latin, making it the northern crown. The Cheyenne nation called it the "Camp

Borealis at the other. Binoculars or a telescope are a treat with this group.

Now, what's going on in the rest of the sky? The whole southern sky is pretty dim in spring, except for the planet Saturn to the upper-right of Spica and about equally bright. As I mentioned, in the west the winter constellations are disappearing: Orion and the group we discussed last season, including the very bright Sirius, are setting in the southwest. The Gemini twins will be the last to leave in May, and Leo will continue to get lower in the west. June 20th marks the solstice: the end of spring and the beginning of summer. And high in the east, our Milky Way galaxy rises once again. Welcome back!

THE PLANETS

JUPITER is in the sun by April 6; our wonderful companion of the southern sky is done with his show. He rises up in the dawn in the second half of May with many other planets. On April 21 Jupiter, Venus and Mercury meet Mars in a diagonal line very close to the horizon,

rising to the upper right. That day they are closest but they play together all month, getting higher in June's dawn. Watch Jupiter speed by every one of them! Even the Pleiades get in the act in June, and a crescent moon joins in the fun June 25-29.

SATURN is the only planet that is far from the sun, and Saturn now takes the place Jupiter had all last season: high in the south, and up all night in the spring night sky. Rising around sunset and up all night, it is the brightest it's been in several years—almost as bright as Arcturus to the upper right and about equal to Spica to the lower left. They all rise in the sky together in May and by the end of June they've passed overhead and are moving towards the west. On April 17 the full moon is in the neighborhood to the lower right. There's an excellent pairing (just 1/2 a degree of separation) of Saturn with Porrima (also called Gamma Virginis), a double star in Virgo. They'll be closest on June 9, but they can be seen together with the moon all month! They should all three fit within a binocular or small telescope field. Of course, this sight would include Saturn's rings, which have been on edge (like looking at a plate with your eye next to the table top) and are now widening (imagine slowly standing up to see the plate from above).

MERCURY spends these spring months hobnobbing with the gang of four planets in the dawn. The big finale is in June, when Mercury is very bright and very low on the dawn horizon just before sunrise. Next in the gang of four are Venus, Mars, and the fast-moving Jupiter heading farther above and to the right, along the ecliptic line. (The ecliptic is the band across the sky where all the planets, moon and sun travel with assorted other stars as a backdrop.) By late June Mercury has fallen into the

sun. And by the very end of June Mercury rises in the evening after sunset, forming a straight line with Caster and Pollux.

VENUS and Jupiter are the brightest of the dawn planet party. Venus spends the spring sinking slowly toward the sun in her bright glory. And by the end of June she is also gone from view, disappearing into the sun. By the way, that's Aldebaran nearby.

MARS and Jupiter are side by side in the dawn at the end of April and beginning of May, along with Mercury and Venus who are close together and above right. Mars spends the spring together with the other three planets in the dawn, DANCING!

OF SPECIAL NOTE

All four planets will adorn the dawn sky especially tightly together in a gathering of a lifetime in May. They start off all very low in the sunrise glow of April. But they rise to dance and play with one another in various interesting ways throughout spring. Even for dawn-doubters it might be worth getting up early for the show; if you watch for several nights you'll see the changes of partners. On April 30 and May 1, come out and see Jupiter, Mars, Mercury and Venus in their show, with a tiny crescent moon coming to the dance. Another crescent and a different planet configuration will occur on May 29-31, with the Pleiades joining the show. In June Aldebaran joins the party too, just below the widening line of the three planets that are left in the sky: Venus, Mars and Jupiter (with the Pleiades above Mars and Aldebaran below it).

The full moons of spring start with The Egg, Grass, Easter or Paschal Moon on April 18. May's full moon is on the 17; it is called The Milk or Planting Moon. June's full moon slides to the 15 and is known as The Flower, Rose or Strawberry Moon. These traditional names come from Native American and Old English names.

The Eta Aquarids meteor should be favorable this year on May 6, with very little moonlight to interfere. To best view this show, lie down warmly and comfortably so you can see as much of the night sky as possible. Then just wait and enjoy.

Astronomy Day is May 7! For more information check out www.astroleague.org.

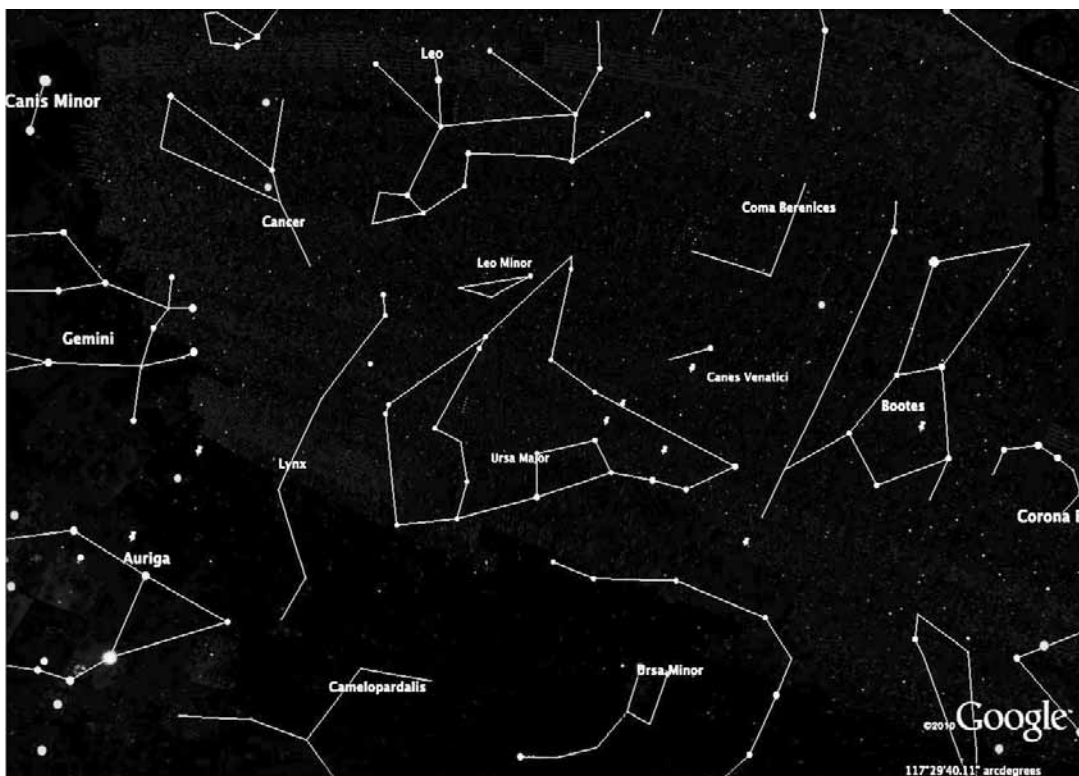
This year's only Friday the 13th occurs in May. Iranian women stay indoors on this day to avoid bad luck. Actually, the 13th falls on a Friday more often than any other day, usually once or twice a year. Interestingly, the 1st falls more commonly on a Sunday. Go figure.

Don't forget the Summer Solstice on June 21: the longest day and the shortest night, approximately, of the year.

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constellation they point to is Leo the lion, but he's upside down. So swing around to see him right-side up. That backwards question-mark is his mane. That bright star at the bottom is Regulus, the point of the question mark and the heart of the lion. (Please note that my map is oriented to get you started finding the North Star and Big Dipper. You'll need to turn the map around at this point so Leo is right-side up.)

The zenith (the actual "top" of the sky) is right between Leo and the Big Dipper, the two big constellations that begin to make spring interesting. Each night during Spring these two constellations swing a bit farther down into the west. In fact, each season the sky moves 1/4 the way around Polaris, until we end up next year at this time with the same configuration.

Now let's look a little deeper into space. On either side of Leo are two very subtle but beautiful constellations: Bootes and Coma Berenices. Find Leo's mane on the right, and a triangle of stars that make up his rump on the left. Keep going left and you'll come to the very bright Arcturus.

Circle" after the way they arranged their camps.

Now that you've located those three constellation—Bootes, Coma Berenices, and Corona Borealis—to the east (left) of Leo, let's add two to the west (right): Gemini and Cancer. Return to the backwards question-mark, which is sometimes called "The Sickle" though it really is Leo's mane. You'll notice that Leo is looking at two of our setting winter stars: Castor and Pollux, the Gemini brothers. They're setting with Orion and the whole gang of winter constellations we know and love. Finally, I want to point out to you another subtle beauty: Cancer. Cancer is on the same arc between Leo and the Gemini twins. It's a smudge just like Coma Bernenicis, but a little brighter and even more beautiful. It's often called the "Bee Hive" and it does seem like a swarm of bees, very intense in the middle and fewer towards the edges.

Congratulations! You have now found a curved sweep of six constellations leading one to the other, with Leo at the center, Gemini at one end, and Corona

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