

Tonight's Sky: April 2018

Your guide to constellations, deep-sky objects, planets, and events: Tonight's Sky.

Highlights of the April sky:

Venus blazes brightly, low in the western sky at nightfall.

With a backyard telescope, we can clearly see the sunlight reflecting off the thick clouds that shroud its surface.

Bright Jupiter rises in the east before midnight.

Even a small telescope can reveal its two most prominent cloud bands.

Late in the evening, high in the northern sky, lies the Great Bear, Ursa Major.

The constellation of Ursa Major contains the well-known star pattern called the Big Dipper. It resembles a large drinking cup with a handle.

The two stars that make up the front side of the cup are called "pointer stars" because they point toward the star Polaris, also known as the North Star.

The Big Dipper overflows with interesting stars and deep-sky objects.

The stars Mizar and Alcor make up a double-star system that can be seen without a telescope. In ancient times, when Mizar and Alcor were even closer together, they were used as a test of keen eyesight.

M81 and M82 are a magnificent pair of galaxies, showpieces of the northern night sky. M82 has an irregular shape, bestowed by a collision with its larger neighbor, M81.

Turning to the south, we see Leo, the Lion, heralding the coming of spring. In Greek mythology, Leo is the great beast slain by Hercules.

The star Denebola, which in Arabic means "tail," represents exactly that.

The bright star Regulus is the heart of the Lion.

Leo has several galaxies in his belly.

M65, M66, and NGC 3628 make up the "Leo Triplet," a lovely grouping of galaxies easily seen with a telescope.

Close by is another group. M95 and M96 are large spiral galaxies.

Between the Big Dipper and the head of Leo are three pairs of bright stars known to ancient Arab astronomers as "The Three Leaps of the Gazelle."

In the hours before dawn, Saturn and Mars rise in the summer constellation of Sagittarius, joining Jupiter in the sky.

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The three planets differ in apparent brightness and size.

The distinctive color of Mars, rings of Saturn, and cloud bands of Jupiter make these planets easy to distinguish with a backyard telescope.

The Lyrid meteor shower will peak in the early morning hours of April 22.

Expect to see up to 20 bright meteors per hour after midnight.

The night sky is always a celestial showcase. Explore its wonders from your own backyard.