

Tonight's Sky Transcript: December 2012

(Intro)

Constellations, deep-sky objects, planets and events, Tonight's Sky, Highlights of the December Sky

Evening Planets

Just after sunset, you might be able to catch a glimpse of Mars before it sets in the west. The planet will be very low on the horizon.

By nightfall, Jupiter hovers above the eastern horizon. As the night progresses, Jupiter climbs higher into the winter night sky.

Constellations and Deep-Sky Objects

Two prominent constellations in the December night sky represent notable individuals of ancient Greek mythology.

The great hero Perseus holds the head of Medusa the Gorgon.

Located in Perseus is M34, an open star cluster about 1,400 light-years away from us.

Open star clusters are groups of young stars that all formed at the same time within a large cloud of dust and gas.

Look for it with the naked eye or with binoculars in a dark sky.

Queen Cassiopeia was punished for her conceit and vanity by being tied to her throne. Cassiopeia's "M" or "W" shape makes this constellation easy to identify.

Eta Cassiopeiae is a wonderful and colorful double star. Use binoculars or a small telescope to discern its gold and blue hues.

M103 in Cassiopeia is a fine open star cluster with a prominent red star near the center. Its fan shape is evident in binoculars.

Lying between Cassiopeia and Perseus is the lovely Double Cluster. This pair of open star clusters is easy to see with binoculars.

The Double Cluster resembles a handful of diamonds scattered on black velvet, with a ruby in between.

Morning Planets

Both Venus and Saturn are early morning planets this month. Look for them in the southeast before sunrise.

Mercury poses a visual challenge during the first half of the month. Try to find it shining between Venus and the horizon before dawn.

Events

The mid-December night sky hosts a lovely meteor shower. From December 13th to 14th, the bright and fast Geminids skip across the upper atmosphere.

Watch for meteors zipping away from the constellation Gemini after midnight. In a dark sky, you could see as many as 60 multicolored meteors per hour.

(Ending)

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

Credits

Produced by the Space Telescope Science Institute, Office of Public Outreach

Starfield images created with Stellarium

Mythological constellation forms from Firmamentum Sobiescianum sive Uranographia by Johannes Hevelius, courtesy of the United States Naval Observatory

Mars image courtesy of Matt Wedel

Jupiter image courtesy of Todd Gross

M34 image courtesy of MicroObservatory Robotic Telescope Network

Eta Cassiopeiae image courtesy of Kevin Muenzler, eaglecreekobservatory.org

M103 image courtesy of Hillary Mathis, N.A.Sharp/AURA/NOAO/NSF

Double Cluster image courtesy of Tim Hunter and James McGaha

Venus and Mercury images courtesy of Mario Weigand

Saturn image courtesy of John Endreson

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