

Stars over Sisters

By Alex Burroughs and Holland Hartman

The Realm of Galaxies is a huge highlight of the spring sky. Large numbers of galaxies can be found in the southern sky between the constellations Leo, Virgo and Coma Berenices. This large group of galaxies is known as the Coma/Virgo Supercluster.

Galaxies, which are groups of particles of dust and gas, are where stars are born and where they will die. The force of gravity pulls dust and other particles together, forming galaxies. Gravity can also cause galaxies to group together to form clusters and superclusters, such as the Coma/Virgo Supercluster, which is also home to the Local Group (where the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies are located). Since the galaxies in the Local Group are so close to us, they can be found in many places around the sky, though most are within the same general area in the southern sky.

The Realm of Galaxies contains at least 3,000 elliptical and spiral galaxies, twenty of which can be viewed easily with amateur equipment. Sixteen of those are Messier objects, labeled with an "M", including M64 and M87. M87

is one of the largest elliptical galaxies in our part of the universe. Its mass is nearly 2.7 trillion times the mass of our sun, meaning that 2.7 trillion of our suns could fit in it. The galaxy is unable to create more stars as there is hardly any dust and gas left over, so it appears featureless. M87 does have a super-massive black hole in its core that is responsible for an energetic jet of plasma that shoots out a distance of nearly 5,000 light-years. This galaxy lies at a distance of about 53 million light-years from the earth.

NGC 4565 is a spiral galaxy that we view edge-on. It is also called the Needle Galaxy because of its long, thin shape. This galaxy is often studied in order to learn more about the Milky Way as they are very similar. NGC 4565 is about 40 million light-years away from Earth and is about 100,000 light-years in length.

The summer solstice in June is the longest day of the year and usually occurs on either June 20, 21, or 22. This year the solstice falls on June 20 at 3:34 p.m. PDT. At this time the Sun will be directly overhead at latitude of 23.5 degrees north. The line of this latitude that circles the earth is also known as the Tropic of Cancer and marks the

northerly-most position the sun reaches in its annual journey across the sky. The Tropic of Cancer passes through Mexico, the Bahamas, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India and Southern China. The summer solstice does not result in the hottest day of the year, however, because of the time it takes for the land and oceans to heat up, so the warmest day of the year is later on in the summer.

Located in the constellation of Ophiuchus, Saturn will be at opposition on June 3, meaning that the sun, the earth and Saturn lie in a straight line. Rising at about 8:30 p.m. local time in the southeast, the Ringed Planet is ideally placed for viewing the entire night.

Mars can also be found in the southeastern sky, between Libra and Scorpius. Mars will spend the entire month retrograding — moving from

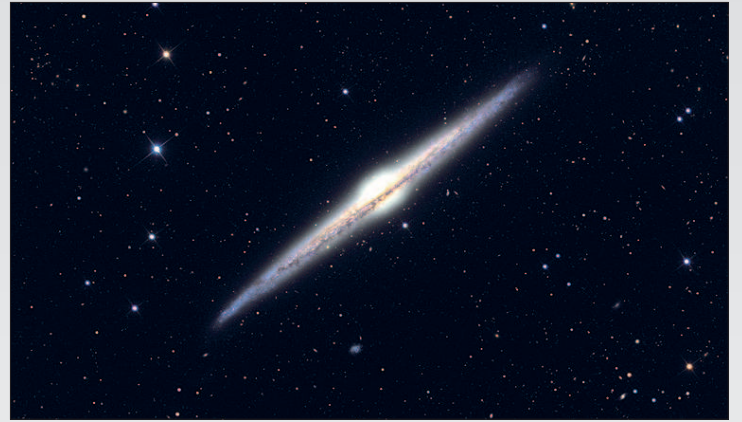


PHOTO BY KEN CRAWFORD RANCHO DEL SOL OBSERVATORY

Located in the constellation of Coma Berenices, NGC 4565 is the best example of an edge-on galaxy visible from the earth.

east to west — back towards Libra. Jupiter is in Leo and continues to shine brightly in the southwestern sky.

The month of June will start off with a waning moon and then the sky will become dark with the new moon on Saturday June 4. Then Monday June 20 the night sky will be lit up again by a full moon.

To learn more about the

night sky, come out to a starwatch put on by Sisters Astronomy Club on Saturday, July 30. The event is free and it starts at 9 p.m. at the SPRD building located at 1750 McKinney Butte Rd. Following a brief presentation, all who attend will have the opportunity to observe the night sky through telescopes provided by local astronomers.

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