

# Stars over Sisters

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Correspondents

February of 2019 has arrived, and with it comes the prospect for beautiful starry skies. There are new things to observe and discover in our immense, dark sky.

The Winter Triangle is an especially prominent feature. This impossible-to-miss asterism consists of the three bright stars that mark the points of the triangle: Procyon, brightest star in Canis Minor, Sirius, brightest star in Canis Major (in fact, the brightest star in the entire sky), and Betelgeuse, second brightest star in Orion. But the triangle itself isn't the primary focus of interest here, except to frame the area of sky within the triangle where a celestial unicorn resides.

Monoceros doesn't date back to antiquity, as do many other constellations, but arrived on the scene relatively recently. This is why very little, if any, mythology is associated with it. The first historical reference to this star grouping appeared on star charts created in 1624 where it was listed as Unicornu. However, it wasn't until 1930 that the International Astronomical Union adopted Monoceros as one of the 88

modern constellations.

Although the constellation is relatively inconspicuous, containing no stars brighter than fourth magnitude, it is home to an extraordinarily beautiful object known as the Rosette Nebula. Officially classified as an emission nebula, this roughly spherical cloud of interstellar gas and dust is a hotbed of star formation. Many young, superhot stars have formed near the nebula's center (an open star cluster known as NGC 2244), from which intense stellar winds are creating a hole.

The Rosette Nebula derives its name from the red color and flower-like shape that's revealed using modern techniques of astrophotography. But don't expect to see this view through your backyard telescope, or any telescope. It's easy to locate NGC 2244, the fine star cluster at the heart of the nebula, but it takes a low-power telescope with a wide field of view, and a clear, moonless night to even begin to detect the dim, white glow of the gas cloud.

Despite being 5.5 times larger than the famous Orion Nebula, the Rosette Nebula is about four times farther from the earth.

Another attractive object worth mentioning is Beta

Monocerotis, the constellation's brightest star. Only by turning a telescope on this star is its true nature revealed—a triple star system! And it can be seen through all but the smallest of backyard telescopes. British astronomer Sir William Herschel, who discovered it in 1781, commented that it is “one of the most beautiful sights in the heavens.”

Mercury and Mars patrol the evening sky this month, while Venus, Jupiter and Saturn populate the pre-dawn celestial canopy.

By mid-month Mercury stands about 5 degrees above the western horizon half an hour after sunset. It spends the rest of the month climbing higher in the sky until on February 26, when the smallest planetary orb reaches its greatest eastern elongation, the separation with the horizon has grown to 11 degrees. Mars, on the other hand, is still well above the horizon by nightfall and doesn't set until 11 p.m. local time on February 15.

At 4 a.m. on February 1 Jupiter is the first planet to burst into the morning sky. This occurs 90 minutes earlier by month's end. Brilliant



PHOTO BY EVANGELOS SOUGLAKOS

The Rosette Nebula is a beautiful emission nebula where new stars are being born, and is located at a distance of approximately 5,200 light-years in the constellation of Monoceros.

Venus arrives on the scene 30 minutes later, followed by Saturn at about 5:30 a.m. The best planetary show of the month will occur on February 18 when Venus and Saturn come into conjunction, staged against a backdrop of stars in the constellation of Sagittarius.

The cycle of the lunar phases is driven by the relative positions of the moon, earth and sun, and indicates the percentage of the moon's face that is illuminated by sunlight at any given time, as viewed from the earth. When the moon is between the earth and sun, its face is unlit and we refer to it as a new moon (NM). Roughly 15 days later

the moon has traveled halfway around the earth in its orbit, resulting in an alignment where the earth is between the moon and the sun. This is a full moon (FM), as the moon becomes fully illuminated.

The first and last quarter phases occur when the moon is at right angles to a straight line between the earth and the sun, resulting in a half-lit moon. The moon is said to be waxing (increasing illumination) when it's between the new and full phases, and waning (decreasing illumination) between full and new.

This month NM will occur on February 4, FQ on February 12, FM on February 19 and LQ on February 26.

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