

THE STARRY SIDE

Stargazing in the dim spring sky

BY GREELEY WELLS

Spring night skies are noted for their huge blank and dim areas. That's because we are looking right out into space away from our own Milky Way galaxy. The stars outside our galaxy are far away and thus small and faint. The galaxy is like a huge plate that is actually visible only slightly all around the horizon line and below, and invisible to us under our feet. It does tip up from the east as the night progresses so more comes into view. Most of the year we look through it at our closest neighbors who live in the Milky Way galaxy with us. There are wonderful exceptions to this dim darkness that make for quite an exciting opportunity to stargaze. We're not so overwhelmed with billions of stars and the brighter ones show up with little competition.

Our main companions are easy to see. The very bright Arcturus is high in the east in May and overhead in June. You can find him by following the arch of the Big Dipper's handle high in the northern sky. Sight away from the dipper along the handle as it goes almost overhead to Arcturus, which is in Bootes, the Shepherd. The rest of him is a bit vague but very kite-like. Arcturus is at the bottom of the kite where you'd tie on the tail. (See illustration.)

In keeping with the theme of dimness is Leo the Lion. Note the backwards question mark with Regulus below as the point—this time very well highlighted by Saturn right next to it in May, but pulling away from it in June as the constellation moves decidedly west, soon to set.

Also fitting into our dim theme is Cancer, which is very subtle until it is highlighted for you by Mars in May, when the moon shares a binocular field with Mars. Cancer is a dim blast of millions of stars in a tight and beautiful slow-motion explosion. With clear skies you can see it with your own eyes. In June, Mars moves east towards Regulus and Leo.

The Planets

Venus is no longer with us, being in the Sun. Not literally, of course, just visually from our point of view. It's really way out past the Sun on the other side of it, moving to slide back out in August. Sadly, neither a sunset nor a sunrise with my favorite bright and beautiful girl.

Jupiter is in some of that blank sky area, rising after 1 am and spending the morning first east and then in the southern sky. At May's end Jupiter is rising at midnight in the east and moving up and across the southern sky. On the nights of May 23-24, Jupiter and the moon accompany each other all night long. By mid June it's rising one and a half hours after sunset, but staying as bright as ever and you'll find it quite low in the southern sky.

Saturn is in the belly of the Lion! On May 3 Saturn stops against the starry background, and slowly starts moving eastward away from Regulus. It won't return to Regulus for nearly 30 years! On May 12 an eight-day-old moon joins Saturn and Regulus to make a trio. If you're a telescope person,

this is the time to enjoy the rings with shadows across Saturn's face.

As mentioned earlier, Mars graces Cancer, also called the Beehive and professionally named M44. It's part way up the western sky at dusk. On May 22 and 23 Mars moves through the beehive. Get out your binoculars! It's in the west, just upper left of the Gemini twin stars. Mars also has a nice brush with a crescent moon on the 9th of May. On May 25 the Phoenix spacecraft touches down in the northern hemisphere of Mars, an area never before explored. What will it show us, what will we learn? The human race exploring other planets—wow! Now in June, Mars actually streaks east to Leo. By the end of June, Mars passes Regulus, the brighter of the two and they make a nice triangle together in that western sky.

Of Special Note

Spring/early summer moons: On May 22, the full moon is called Grain Moon, Green or Corn Moon. June's moon on the 18th is the Fruit Moon.

A few days later, on June 20, is the solstice, called the longest day of the year. Actually June 14 is the earliest sunrise at 4:31 am. The latest sunset is June 27 at 7:33 pm at 40° latitude. There's an hourglass diagram that's used to create what we call the longest day this year, which is the 20th of June, at the "moment" the sun is at its highest and hottest. So why does summer continue to warm even as the sun spends less time in the sky and gets lower? It's counter

intuitive! Just found this explanation: It takes a long time for that heat buildup to dissipate. So I guess the heat still produced plus the residue heat that lingers creates all that temperature rise. Is this intuitive enough? I leave it to you.

In late June come the Bootid meteors, which also should be favorable this year. Morning is always better but on June 27, the radiant is up all night. (May or may not be impressive. The scientists are never really sure.) The radiant is overhead coming "out" of Bootes where Arcturus lives, and is close to overhead and westerly.

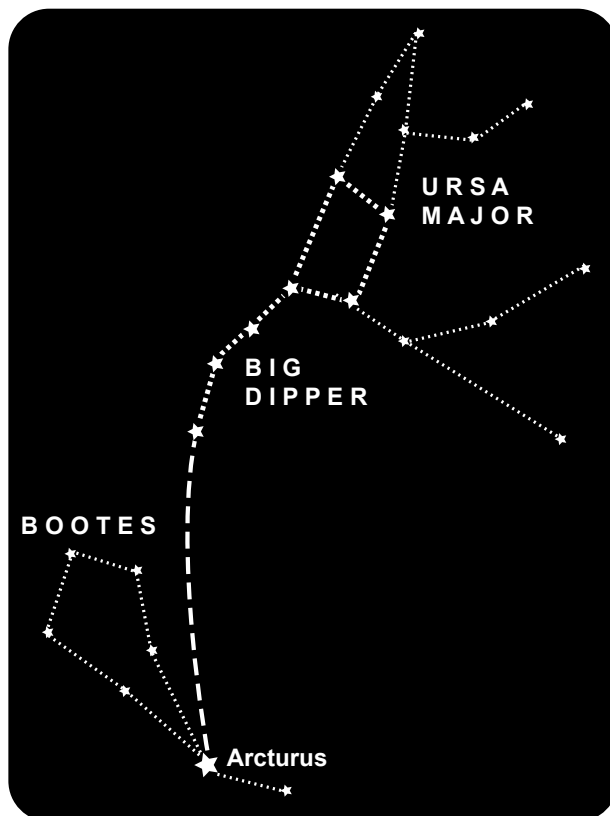
OK, look out or whatever: June 13 is the only Friday the 13th of the year. In South America the unlucky day is Tuesday, in Italy the unlucky number is 17, etc., so it's cultural not literal! Relax.

To close the circle (of the Milky Way galaxy) by June's end, Deneb, in Cygnus the swan, is up in the east with the band of our galaxy, the Milky Way, rising enough to be seen along the eastern horizon. Vega, in Lyra, is even higher, and these are two of the three stars of the summer triangle yet to show up. The third star is Altar in Aquila, the eagle.

Ah... summer. Welcome! I'm really ready for your arrival this year.

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