

Mountaineer Skies

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<http://www.as.wvu.edu/~planet/index.html>

March 2003

From the Editor's Desk

The **Vernal Equinox**, the first day of spring, arrives this year on Thursday, March 20. This is just one of the two days of the year when the sun rises directly east and sets directly west, and we have a day when the periods of daylight and darkness are of equal length. The other day is the first day of autumn called the **Autumnal Equinox**, which occurs this year on Tuesday, September 23.

Frequently people ask me about choosing a first telescope for a child. This is a question that I am reluctant to answer. Often the best option is a pair of binoculars rather than a telescope. Here are three sites that you might look at before you invest in one.

<http://members.aol.com/bemusabord/first.html>

<http://findascope.com/>

<http://www.scopereviews.com/begin.html>

In The Sky This Month

Visible Planets in the Night Sky

Beginning of March, 2003

	Const	Rise	Transit	Set	Mag
Sun		6:49	12:32	18:15	- 26.8
Mercury	Cap	6:20	11:36	16:48	- 0.4
Venus	Sgr	4:49	9:48	14:46	- 4.1
Mars	Sgr	2:51	7:34	12:17	0.9
Jupiter	Cnc	15:21	22:31	5:42	-2.5
Saturn	Tau	11:40	19:09	2:33	2.4

Middle of March, 2003

	Const	Rise	Transit	Set	Mag
Sun		6:27	12:29	18:30	- 26.8
Venus	Cap	4:49	10:01	15:12	- 4.0
Mars	Sqr	2:35	7:17	12:00	0.7
Jupiter	Cnc	14:20	21:32	4:44	- 2.5
Saturn	Tau	10:46	18:15	1:40	2.4

End of March, 2003

	Const	Rise	Transit	Set	Mag
Sun		6:01	12:24	18:46	- 26.8
Mercury	Psc	6:27	13:01	19:37	- 1.4
Venus	Aqr	4:41	10:13	15:44	- 4.0
Mars	Sgr	2:13	6:58	11:43	0.5
Jupiter	Cnc	13:15	20:27	3:39	- 2.4
Saturn	Tau	9:47	17:16	00:41	2.5

Cap	Capricornus, The Goat
Cnc	Cancer, The Crab
Sgr	Sagittarius, The Archer
Psc	Pisces, The Fishes
Tau	Taurus, The Bull
Aqr	Aquarius, The Water Bearer

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

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About: Asteroid Vesta

Many thousands of asteroids (or minor planets) circle the Sun, mainly through the asteroid belt between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. Generally, none is visible without a telescope – though rarely, one will come close enough to Earth to be seen with ordinary binoculars. Such is the case with Asteroid Vesta this March and April.

Vesta now resides in the constellation Virgo, the virgin. Around 10:30 p.m. on March 1 (9:30 p.m. March 15, 8:30 p.m. April 1), the majestic maiden stands upright on your eastern horizon, stretching halfway to the summit of the sky. Throughout March, the asteroid lingers near her arm -- as if it's a stone adorning her bracelet.

Even without knowing Virgo, you can star hop to Vesta from the Big Dipper. During the windy month of March, it appears in the northeast sky at nightfall -- though it might look more like a kite than a dipper. The bowl stands atop the starlit handle, which drifts below like a kite's tail.

At mid evening, the arc of the Big Dipper handle extended downward points to two brilliant stars. Yellow-orange Arcturus, the brighter of the two, shines to your left, while blue-white Spica sparkles to the right. The asteroid resides to the upper right of Arcturus and the upper left of Spica (See enclosed star map.)

In early March, Vesta passes between two stars: Vindemiatrix and Delta. Sharing the same binocular field with either star, it snuggles a bit closer to Delta, the dimmer one. Through binoculars, Vesta looks like a star (asteroid means "star-like") – but unlike true stars, asteroids MOVE through the constellations.

Given dark skies, sharp-eyed people should be able to catch this tantalizing world with the eyes alone. Closest to Earth on March 31, it appears brightest in late March and early April.

Bruce McClure

Upcoming Event

Although in different orbits, Earth, being faster than Mars, is catching up with the Red planet. In fact on the morning of August 27, 2003, Mars will be closer to the Earth than it has been for over 70,000 years. The distances between the two planets will shrink to only 34.65 million miles (55.76 million kilometers).

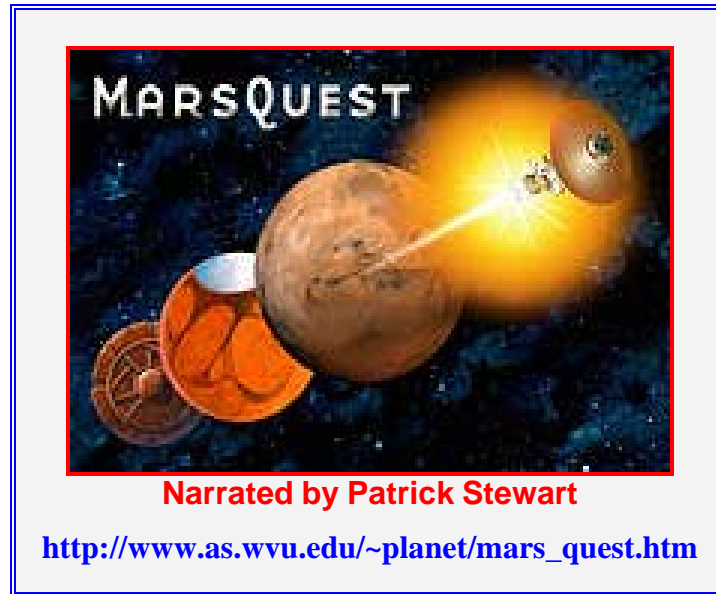
Mars will indeed appear to be very bright, having a magnitude of -2.9, but it will not be especially large. However, this is an excellent time to view the planet with binoculars or a small telescope.

If you are fortunate enough to have a larger telescope, the polar ice cap and dark surface features should be visible. If sky conditions are especially favorable, dust storm clouds may be seen.

Crop Circles

During the holidays I was forced by circumstances to see a movie called *Signs* starring Mel Gibson. It was advertised as a science fiction film, but it turned out to be a melodrama instead. Crop circles were part of the plot, so I thought that I would examine their origins beginning in the April issue in time for April Fool's Day. This article will not pretend to have all of the answers about crop circles, but it will respond to many of them.

2003 Planetarium Shows



March 14 & 28, 2003 <i>MarsQuest</i>	April 11 & 25, 2003 <i>MarsQuest</i>	May 9 & 23, 2003 <i>MarsQuest</i>
June 13, 2003 <i>MarsQuest</i>	July, 2003 Closed	

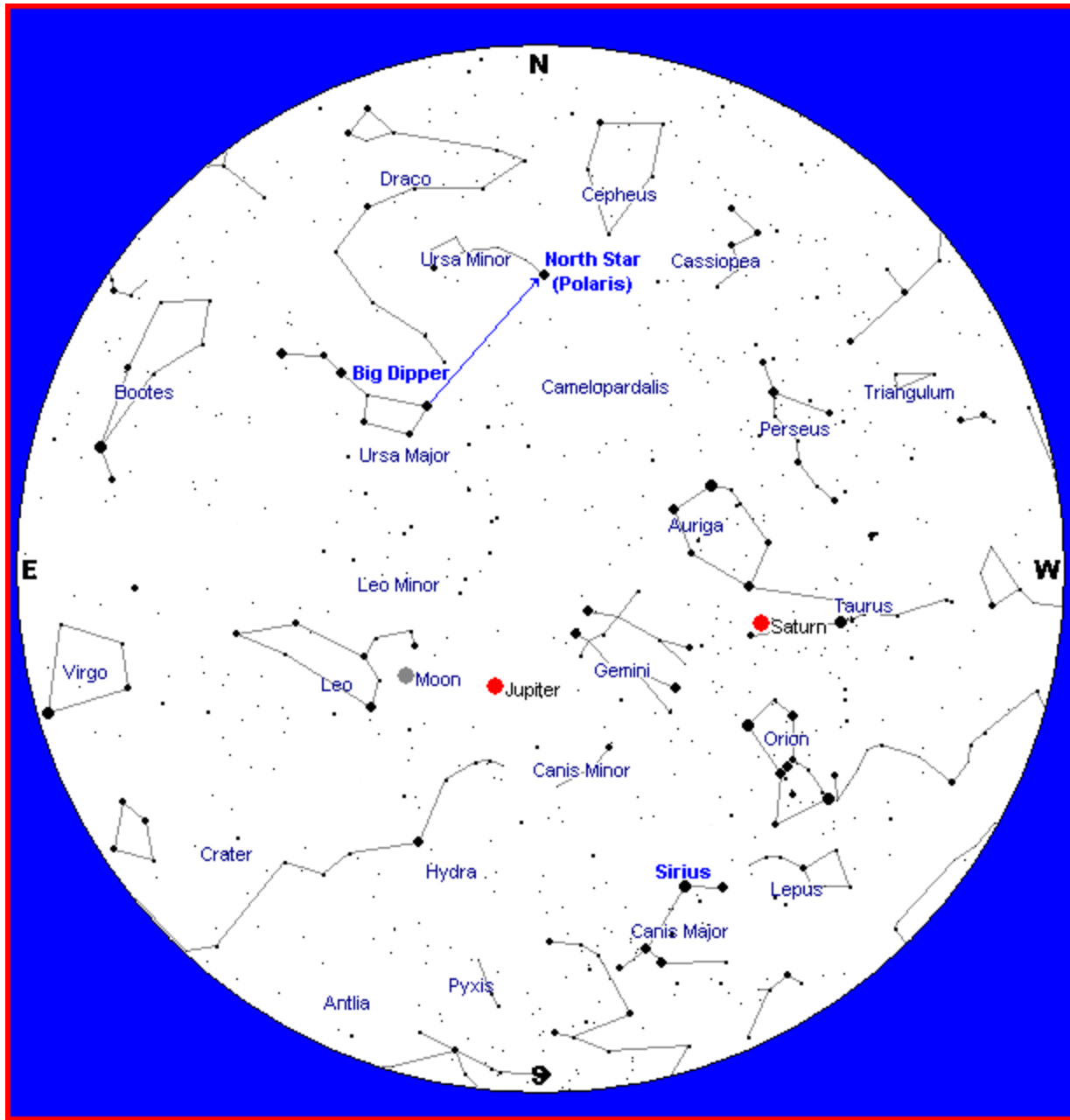
For those who are interested in bringing a group, such as schools or scouts, during the day, please call for more information. These shows are usually given on Tuesday or Thursday mornings.

For further information or reservations, please call John Hopkins at (304)293-3422, extension 1443 or by email at: jhopkins@mail.wvu.edu

Selected Sunrise/Sunset and Moon Rise/Moon Set Times

Date	Sunrise	Sunset	Moon Rise	Moon Set	Moon Phase
Mar 2	6:52 A.M.	6:11 P.M.	7:03 A.M.	5:51 P.M.	New Moon
Mar 11	6:38 A.M.	6:21 P.M.	11:10 A.M.	1:50 A.M.	First Quarter
Mar 18	6:27 A.M.	6:28 P.M.	7:00 P.M.	6:53 A.M.	Full Moon
Mar 24	6:17 A.M.	6:34 P.M.	1:14 A.M.	10:29 A.M.	Last Quarter

March 2003 Sky Chart* for:
 10:00 P.M at the beginning of the month
 9:00 P.M in the middle of the month
 8:00 P.M at the end of the month



*Sky Chart used with the kind permission of **Heavens-Above** at <http://www.heavens-above.com/>

The TOMCHIN PLANETARIUM is named in honor of the late Harold Tomchin, of Princeton, W.Va., who made a generous donation to ensure its continuing operation, and whose family continues to support the planetarium for the educational benefit of WVU students, staff, and faculty members, as well as the local community. Contributions can be made in support of the planetarium through the WVU Planetarium Project at the WVU Foundation, Inc., phone (304)284-4000. Thank You.



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