

Mercury visible

by James Stokley

In the first few days of April you'll have the best chance of the year of seeing the elusive planet Mercury. It is visible low in the west soon after sunset.

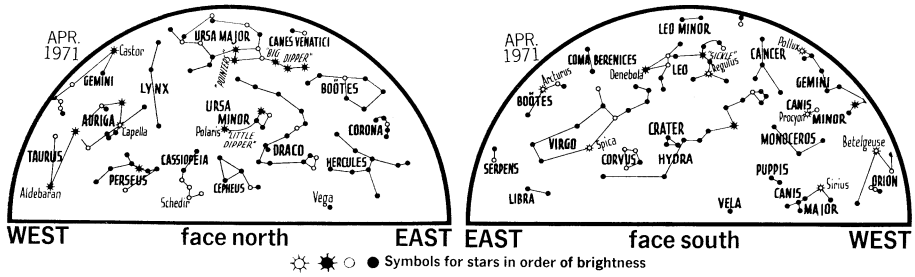
Mercury, only 36 million miles from the sun, is the most rapidly moving planet. It goes around its orbit every 88 days with an average speed of about 30 miles per second. The earth, 92.9 million miles from the sun, makes a revolution in 365.26 days, with an average speed of about 18 miles per second.

If, as seen from the sun, Mercury is in a particular direction in space, it will thus be in the same direction 88 days later. However, in this period, the earth moves about a quarter of the distance around its orbit. Therefore, if Mercury goes between sun and earth, 116 days will pass before it catches up to us again.

For us earth-dwellers Mercury is never very far from the sun; never more than 28 degrees to the east or west. This time, on April 1, it will be only 19 degrees east of the sun. Then it moves toward the sun, passing it on April 19, and then swings away once more. On May 17, farthest west, Mercury will be low in the eastern sky just before sunrise.

CELESTIAL TIMETABLE

April	EST	
1	early a.m.	Mercury farthest east of sun
2	10:46 a.m.	Moon in first quarter
6	9:00 a.m.	Moon passes south of Regulus
8	3:00 a.m.	Moon farthest, distance 252,300 miles
10	3:10 p.m.	Full moon
14	10:00 a.m.	Moon passes south of Jupiter
	3:00 p.m.	Moon passes south of Antares (star in Scorpius)
17	8:00 p.m.	Moon passes south of Mars
18	7:58 a.m.	Moon in last quarter
19	6:00 p.m.	Mercury in same direction as sun
22	6:00 p.m.	Moon passes north of Venus
23	1:00 p.m.	Moon nearest, distance 224,100 miles
24	11:02 p.m. EDT	New moon
26	10:00 a.m.	Moon passes north of Saturn



Then it moves back toward the sun, passing behind it on June 21. On July 29 it will be at its greatest eastern elongation, as it was at the beginning of April.

The accompanying maps, with no

planets illustrated, show the sky as it looks about 10 p.m., local standard time, on April 1, an hour earlier on the 15th and two hours earlier (about 9 p.m. local daylight savings time) on the 30th. □

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