

Stars

Five bright stars, two planets dominate in May sky

by James Stokley

CELESTIAL TIME TABLE

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|-------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| May 4 | 1:00 pm EDT | Mercury behind sun |
| 6 | 4:55 am | Full moon |
| 12 | 1:00 pm | Moon farthest, distance 251,270 miles |
| 14 | 5:29 am | Moon in last quarter |
| 16 | 3:00 am | Moon passes north of Jupiter |
| 18 | 3:00 pm | Moon passes north of Venus |
| 21 | 4:34 pm | New moon |
| 23 | midnight | Moon passes south of Saturn |
| 24 | 9:00 am | Moon nearest, distance 226,420 miles |
| 25 | 6:00 pm | Moon passes south of Mars |
| 28 | 9:03 am | Moon in first quarter |

Five bright stars are well placed in the evening sky of May, but the two planets on view, Saturn and Mars, are low in the west. Several other first-magnitude stars can be seen, but near the horizon and considerably dimmed.

These are shown on the accompanying maps, which depict the sky as it looks about 11 p.m., local daylight saving time, May 1 and about 10 p.m. on May 15.

Vega is the brightest star, in the northeast in Lyra. In the northwest, in Auriga, is Capella, a little fainter. To the left of this group you'll see Gemini, with Pollux, about two-fifths as bright as Vega. Near it is Castor, a second-magnitude star about a sixth as bright as Pollux. To the left (on the southern sky map) is Procyon, in Canis Minor.

Also in Gemini are the two planets. Saturn is lower, and dimmed because it's so near the horizon. Mars is about a quarter as bright as Saturn and of the second magnitude.

Still receding from earth its distance of 184 million miles on May 1 increases to 205 million on May 31.

Look southward for three of the most prominent stars. Arcturus, in Boötes, is high in the southeast, about equal to Capella, although it looks brighter because it's higher. Farther right is Leo, with Regulus, less than half as bright. This star is part of a little figure called the Sickle. Extending eastward and ending just below the western end of Boötes stands Virgo. Here you'll find the star Spica.

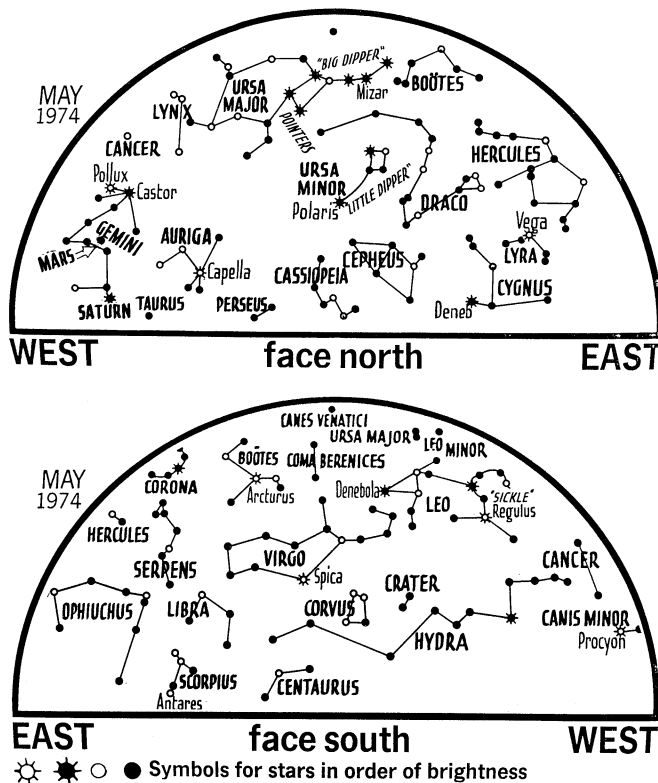
Scorpius is low in the southeast, only part of it above the horizon. Its principal star, Antares, is shown, but greatly dimmed. Later in the night it will shine prominently in the south when it's higher and the whole constellation is visible. Near the northeastern horizon, below Lyra, Cygnus also is partly shown, with Deneb.

In the last few days of May you might

see a third planet in the west at dusk, to the left of Saturn and a little higher. This is Mercury, which will then be moving to the east of the sun so that it remains visible after sunset. After June 4 it will be moving back toward the sun and, after another week, will no longer be seen.

Brilliant Jupiter rises in the east about 3:30 a.m. at the beginning of May, about 2½ hours before sunrise. Venus, even brighter, follows more than half an hour later. Well after the light of dawn hides the stars you'll still be able to see these two planets.

Altogether nine principal planets revolve around the sun: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Mercury, Mars and Saturn, as mentioned, will be visible during the evening in May; while Venus and Jupiter shine in the east of dawn. And the other three are also in the May evening sky—but you won't be able to see them without telescopic aid. □



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