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SKY GUIDE

Astronomical guide for April 2026

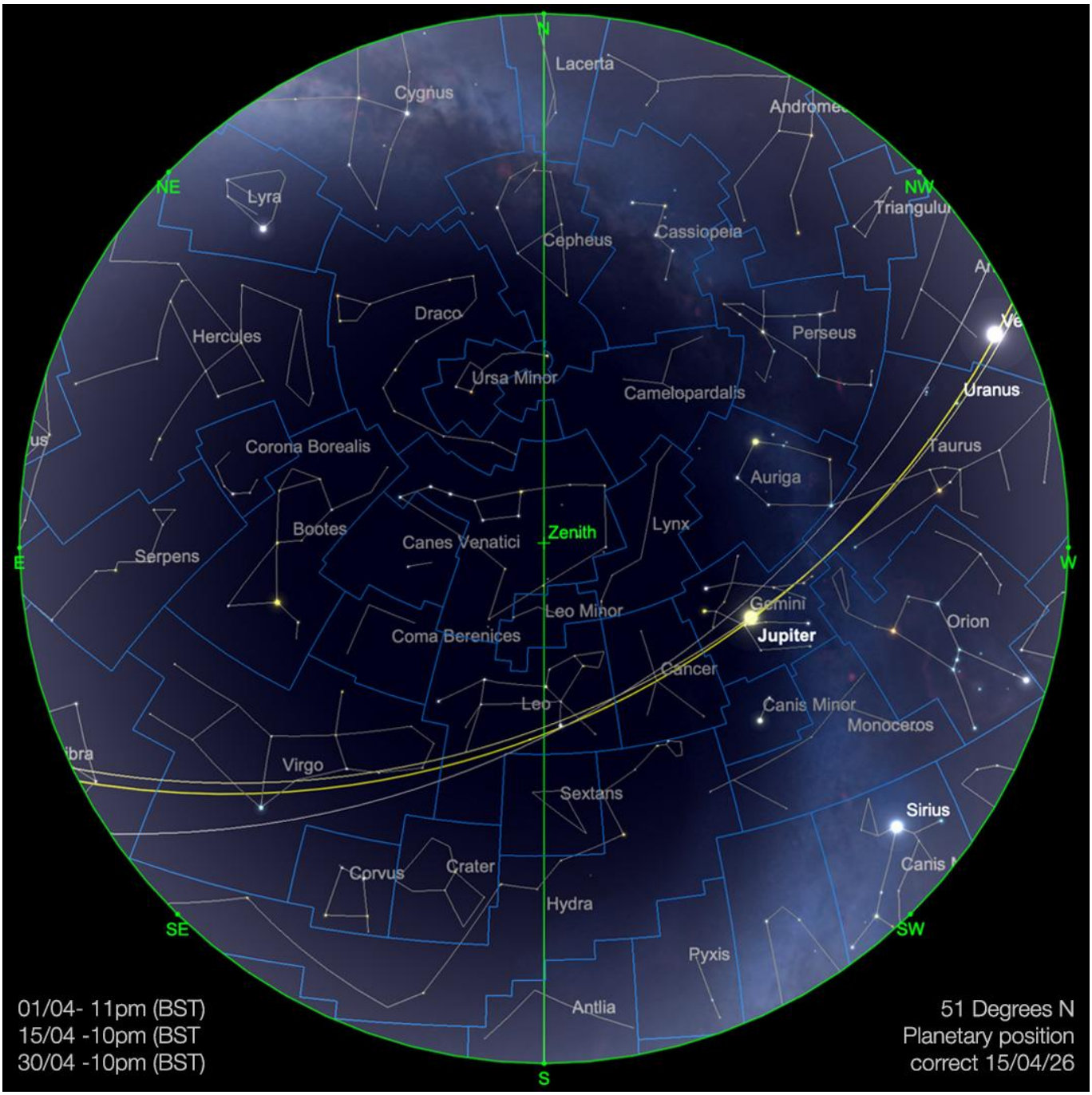
The most up-to-date guide to planetary and lunar activity, comet news and deep space wonders.

Publisher: **Bresser GmbH**
Gutenbergstr. 2 · 46414 Rhede · Germany
+49 (0) 28 72 – 80 74 – 0
info@bresser.de · www.bresser.de

Original text: Kerin Smith

Expand your horizon

Bresser UK April Sky Guide



April 2026 is here and for observers in the Northern Hemisphere the Vernal Equinox now lies in the past. This movement of the Sun into the northern celestial hemisphere brings the inevitable expansion of daylight and a corresponding loss of astronomical darkness. For the stargazing community this month is a period of transition. While the milder temperatures provide a more comfortable experience those located at high northern latitudes must work quickly to utilise the shrinking hours of true night.

Climatological studies from Russell Group institutions like the University of Reading often indicate that the "April showers" trope is a meteorological oversimplification. Statistical records across much of Europe show that April is frequently one of the drier months of the spring cycle. Considering one of the wettest winters on record, we could not be blamed for thinking we are owed a bit of a break in the weather.

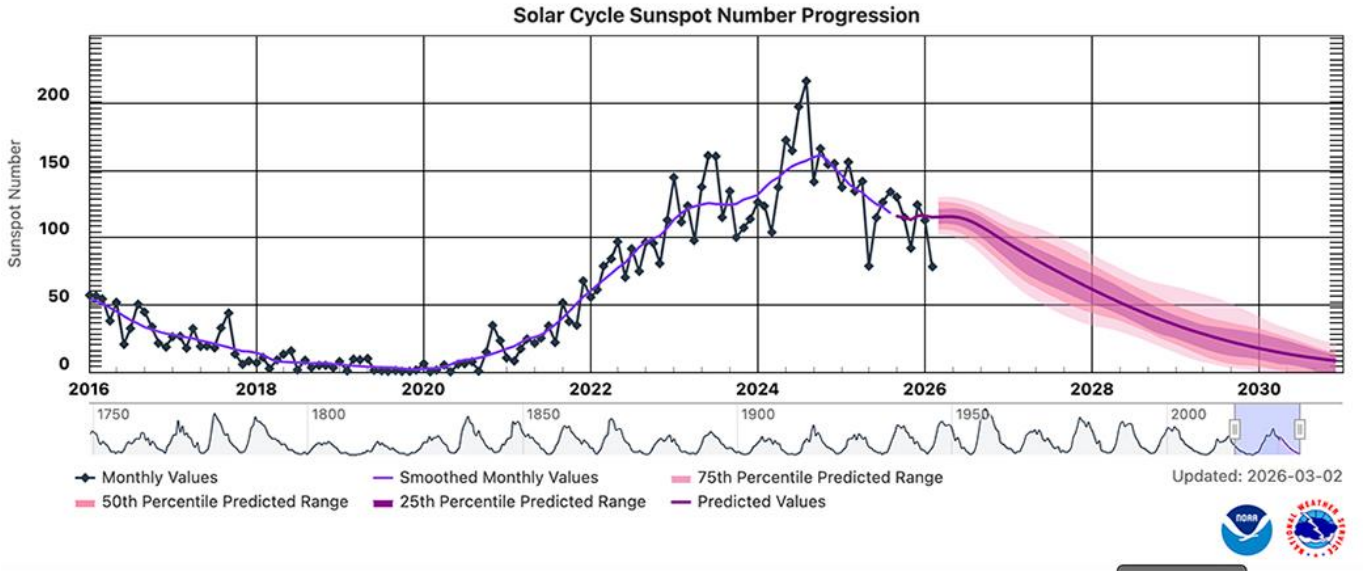
Regardless of the local weather patterns the 2026 night sky remains exceptionally active with planetary conjunctions and significant cometary activity providing ample motivation to look upwards. As we all look forward to improved weather, wherever you find yourself, there's plenty to see in the skies above us this month.

The Sun

Solar activity during March 2026 was moderate and somewhat lower than earlier in Solar Cycle 25. Data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Space Weather Prediction Center indicate a monthly mean sunspot number close to 78 - as opposed to a predicted number of just under 115. This reflects a Sun still producing several active regions but lacking the large complex sunspot groups typical of peak conditions.

Geomagnetic conditions were mostly quiet to unsettled during the first half of the month, with only minor disturbances and limited auroral visibility confined to higher latitudes. Activity increased around the March equinox when enhanced solar wind streams and coronal mass ejections reached Earth. Between 19th and 22nd March a moderate to strong geomagnetic storm developed, briefly reaching G3 intensity. This produced widespread auroral displays visible across Northern Europe and North America, with occasional reports from mid-latitude locations under clear skies. After this period activity declined, although weaker disturbances continued to support high-latitude aurorae into the final week of March.

As ever, the Sun's behaviour proves difficult to predict with superb accuracy. For those who wish to follow day to day solar behaviour more closely, established services such as Spaceweather.com provide clear summaries of sunspots, flares and coronal mass ejections. Michel Deconinck's Aquarellia Observatory newsletter Aquarellia Observatory Forecasts, also offers a concise monthly overview of solar, heliospheric and geomagnetic conditions which complements official output from the NOAA Space Weather Prediction Center. Observers particularly interested in auroral activity should consider the AuroraWatch UK service from Lancaster University. Its app and alert system use real time geomagnetic data to provide timely warnings and remain among the most reliable tools in the United Kingdom for anticipating potential auroral displays when solar conditions permit.



NOAA Sunspot numbers in the current solar cycle. Public Domain.

The Moon

April 2026 begins with the Moon approaching Full, in Virgo. Reaching Full phase on 2nd April while positioned in Libra, over the preceding nights of the first week of the month, the bright waning gibbous Moon moves steadily eastwards, sliding from Libra into Scorpius and then into Sagittarius. At this stage it rises around sunset and remains prominent for most of the night, so conditions for observing faint deep sky objects are limited. Although the strongly illuminated Moon offers pleasing naked eye views, telescopic views are somewhat lacking at this time, with many lunar features bleached out.

Through the 6th to the 9th April, the Moon continues along the ecliptic through Scorpius, Ophiuchus and into Sagittarius, with its illuminated portion gradually shrinking.

Last Quarter falls on 10th April in Sagittarius. At this half-lit phase the terminator runs centrally across the lunar disc and relief along crater rims and mountain chains is especially striking. The Moon now rises around 4am and is best placed in the morning sky. After Last Quarter the waning crescent passes through Capricornus on 11th and 12th April, then into Aquarius between 13th and 14th April. Each morning the crescent becomes thinner and lower above the eastern horizon.

By 15th April the Moon has entered Pisces as a very delicate sliver in the dawn twilight.

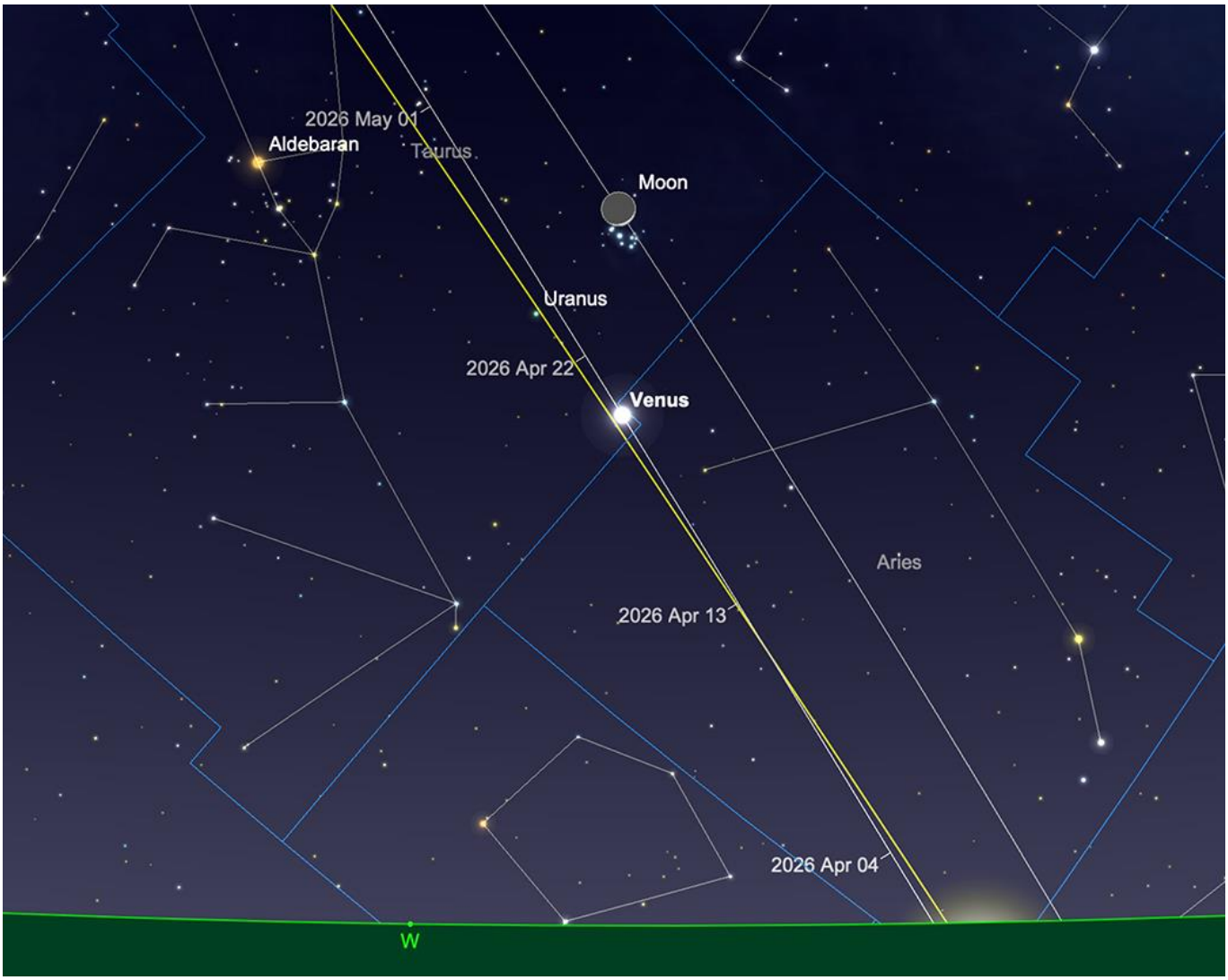
New Moon occurs on 17th April in Pisces. Around this time the lunar disc is effectively invisible and the surrounding nights offer the darkest skies of the month. These are the most favourable evenings for observing and imaging faint galaxies, nebulae and clusters under clear conditions.

Following New Moon, the young waxing crescent reappears low in the western evening sky. On 18th April it is found in Aries, alongside Venus and then moves into Taurus on the 19th April, occulting the Pleiades star cluster just before sunset. The early evening of the 19th offers quite a vista for those with binoculars to observe, with Venus, the Pleiades and the Moon all clustered together.

This period also coincides with the high spring crescent geometry in the northern hemisphere, placing the Moon at a comparatively steep angle above the horizon after sunset and providing excellent opportunities to study the terminator through binoculars or a telescope. This is one of the often mentioned “High Spring Crescent” phases of the Moon and a really wonderful time to observe our natural satellite in the evening sky.

The young crescent Moon crosses through Taurus and Gemini and on the 23rd April, crosses into Cancer, where it reaches First Quarter on 24th. The half-illuminated disc is now visible high in the early evening sky and surface features stand out with good contrast, making this another favourable phase for telescopic observation.

During the final week of April the Moon swells to gibbous phase, while continuing eastwards through Leo into Virgo around 27th April, where it ends the month approaching Full again, bringing April to a close, under increasingly bright moonlit skies.



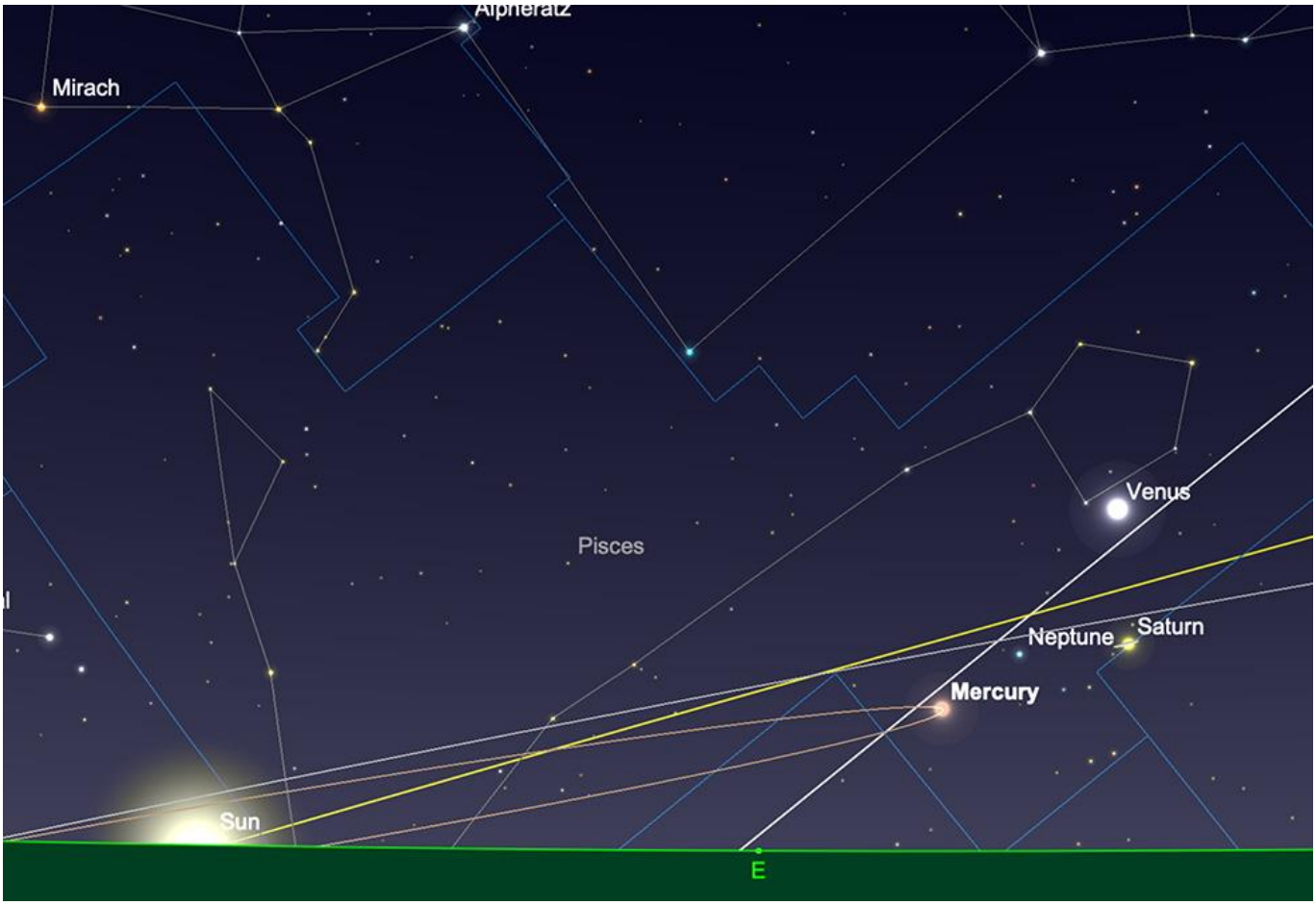
The Moon, alongside Venus and the Pleiades, 19th April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Mercury

Mercury reaches Greatest Western Elongation on 3rd April, sitting just under 28° from the Sun. At magnitude +0.4, it is best viewed approximately forty-five minutes before sunrise in the east-southeast. However, despite this wide separation from our parent star, Mercury's southerly declination in Aquarius limits its altitude for northern latitudes. It only appear 5° above the horizon at sunrise (as observed from 51° N).

The highlight occurs on 20th April when Mercury joins Mars and Saturn in a tight planetary trio. Mercury brightens to magnitude -0.1 and sits 0.5° south of Saturn. While this grouping would be a compelling target for both visual observing and astrophotography, all three planets remain embedded in the brightening dawn and sit so low in the sky for most northern hemisphere observers, that it is hard to recommend bothering with. Those around the equatorial regions of the Earth will far much better in seeing this.

By 30th April, Mercury begins its descent towards superior conjunction. Although its brightness increases to magnitude -2.0, its height above the horizon and proximity to the solar disc renders it invisible to higher latitude northern hemisphere-based observers.



Mercury at greatest western elongation, sunrise, 3rd April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

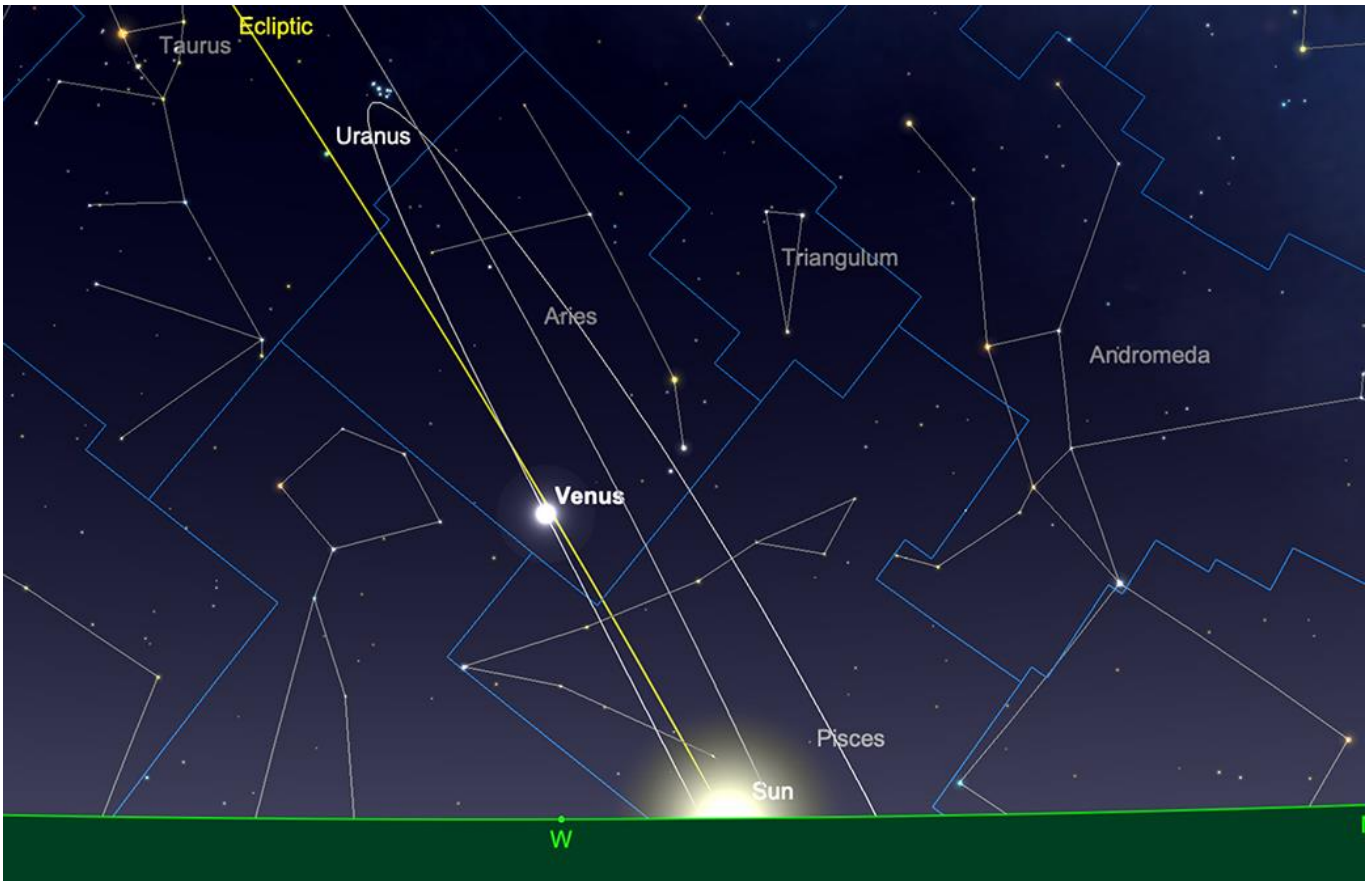
Venus

Whereas observing Mercury is a basic non-starter for most of us in higher northern latitudes, Venus offers us something different. Observing Venus from Northern Europe during April 2026 offers a spectacular display as the "Evening Star" gains prominence in the western sky. Throughout the month, the planet serves as a brilliant beacon in the twilight, benefiting from the steep spring ecliptic angle that provides greater altitude above the horizon for observers in higher latitudes.

At the beginning of the month, Venus is positioned within the constellation of Aries at a steady magnitude of -3.9. The planet will stand around 17 degrees above the horizon at sunset on the evening of the 1st. Observers looking towards the west-northwest approximately forty-five minutes after sunset, when skies are darker, will find the planet sitting roughly 10° above the horizon.

Venus transitions into the constellation of Taurus on 19th April, where it will stand around 20° high (as observed from 51° N) at sunset. A particularly photogenic alignment occurs on 18th and 19th April when the slender crescent Moon appears in close proximity. Practical observation is best achieved with a clear western horizon and the planet now remains visible for nearly two hours after the Sun has set.

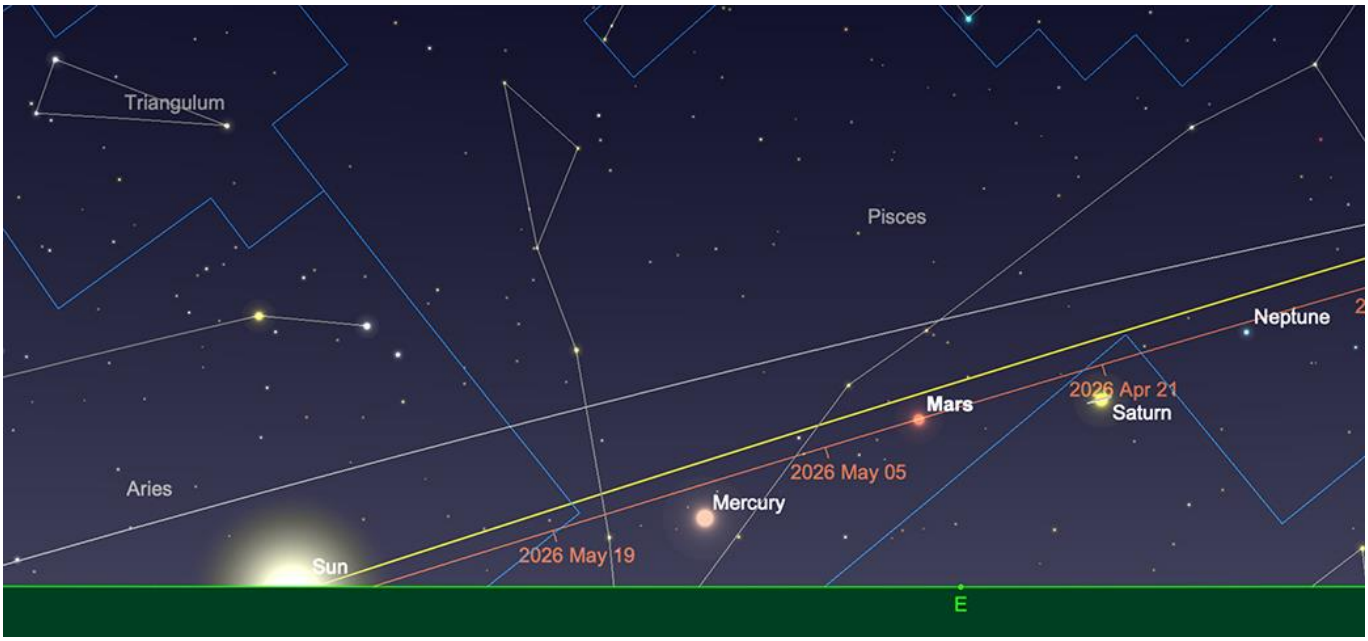
As the month ends, Venus passes just south of the Pleiades star cluster around 23rd April and reaches a difficult to observe conjunction with Uranus on 24th. By 30 April, the planet is slightly higher at dusk, at 22° (again, as observed from 51° N) and its brilliant silvery beacon-like light makes it unmistakable, even from light-polluted city centres. The planet will remain at around -3.9 magnitude - far brighter than anything in the sky apart from the Sun and Moon. At 11.6 arc seconds diameter at the end of April, Venus presents a gibbous phase to us and will reward telescopic observations, though ND filters are often recommended to cut down on the inevitable glare from such a brilliant target.



Venus at sunset, 30th April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Mars

In April 2026 Mars remains a challenging morning target in Northern Europe. Starting in Aquarius at magnitude +1.2, it sits low in the east-southeast. After mid-month, as previously mentioned, on 20th April it forms a tight planetary trio with Saturn and Mercury. However, this conjunction will be incredibly difficult to observe from mid northern latitudes due to the elevation of all three worlds. By the end of April, Mars has crossed over into Pisces, but is not that much easier to observer, as it still sits very low in the sky at sunrise.



Mars at sunrise, April 30th. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Jupiter

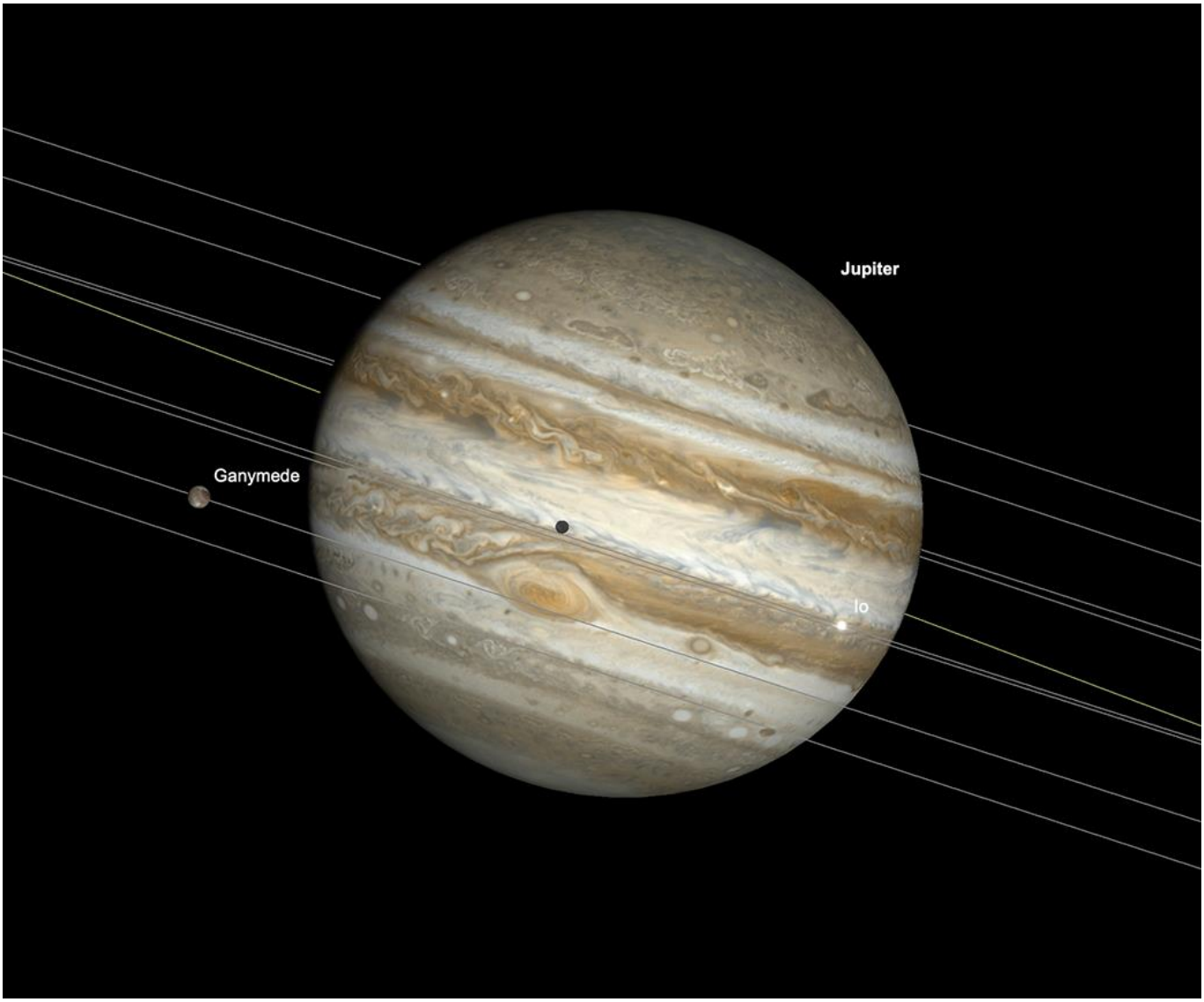
Jupiter remains a brilliant spectacle in the northern hemisphere sky throughout April 2026. Situated in the constellation of Gemini, with a northerly declination of 23°, its high elevation ensures exceptionally clear telescopic views for those in the northern hemisphere.

Early in the month Jupiter shines at magnitude -2.2 high in the southern sky after sunset, at an elevation of 62° (as observed from 51° N). This altitude makes it a perfect target for observing the Galilean moons and atmospheric bands. Jupiter is a healthy diameter of just under 39 arc seconds on the evening of the 1st April

By mid-month the planet continues its eastward motion through Gemini., having decreased fractionally in brightness to -2.1 magnitude and remains visible until setting in the northwest around 3am (BST).

Toward the end of the month a striking encounter occurs on 22 April when the waxing gibbous Moon passes just north of the planet. By 30 April Jupiter has decreased to -2.0 magnitude and although it sets earlier, remains the dominant evening object until well past midnight.

As usual, there are a few mutual Jovian transit events to witness from Europe during April. The first of these occurs on April 2nd, when the Great Red Spot, Io and Ganymede come into mutual transit. This event begins at around 7 pm (BST). There is another GRS and Io transit, which occurs at just before 9 pm on April 9th. This is closely followed by a Ganymede transit which begins at a little before 2 am on the morning of the 10th. There is a nice GRS and Europa transit which occurs around sunset on April 24th.



Jupiter, GRS and Io Transit, 9pm (BST), 2nd April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

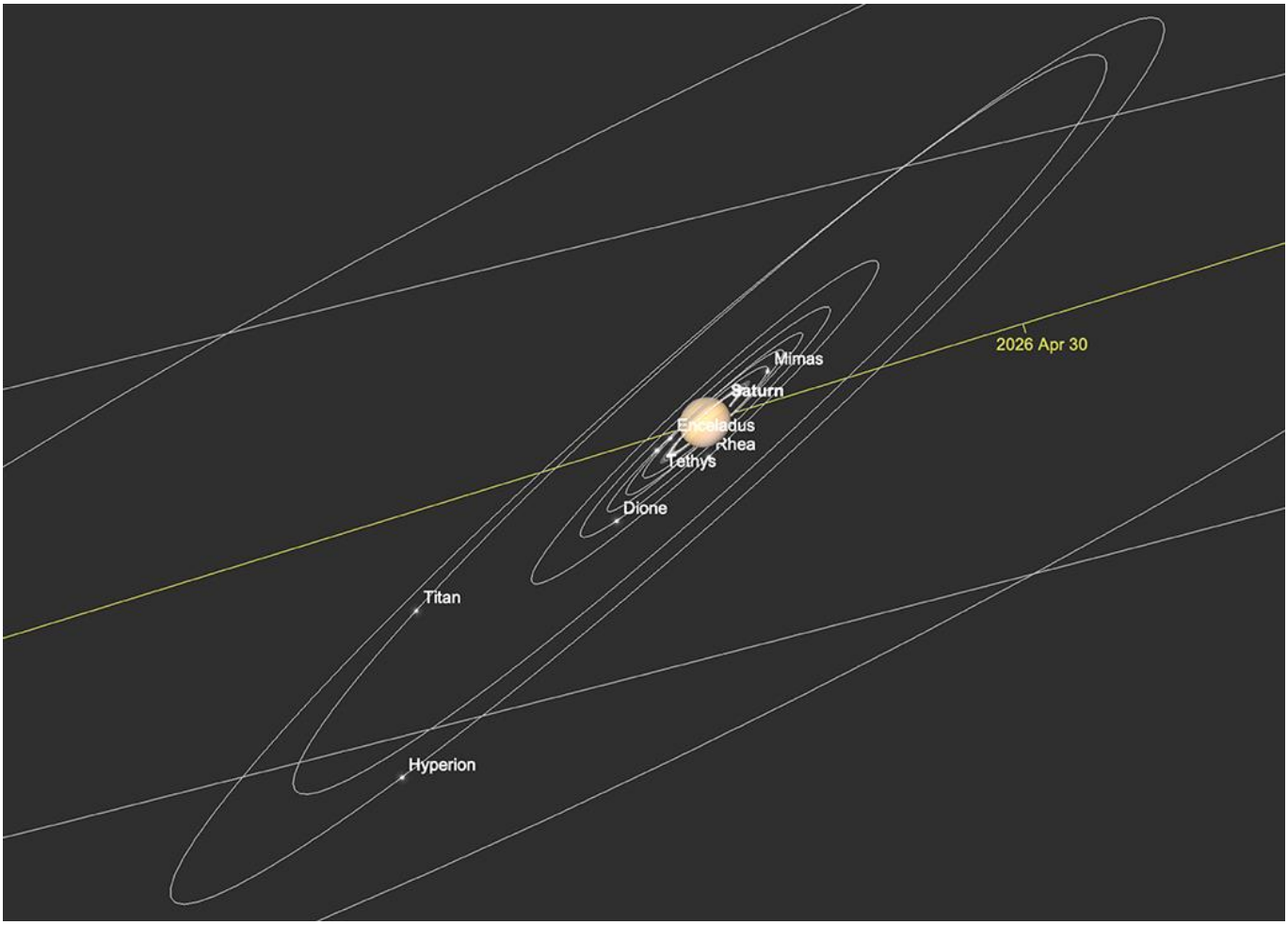
Saturn

Saturn remains a challenging target for Northern European observers throughout early April, as it separates from the solar glare following its late March Superior Conjunction.

At the start of the month the planet resides in Pisces and is too close to the horizon for practical viewing.

By mid-month accessibility improves as Saturn starts to rise in the pre-dawn sky. On 20th April it participates in a triple conjunction with Mars and Mercury which is, as previously reported, going to be very challenging, if not impossible to observe.

By late April, Saturn gains enough altitude to be glimpsed very briefly before sunrise for those with exceptionally clear easterly horizons. However, it will be another couple of months before Saturn is of reasonable altitude in the morning sky for observation in the temperate northern hemisphere.



Saturn and Moons, sunrise, 30th April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Uranus and Neptune

Of the two outer gas giants, Uranus is most definitely better placed. The planet can be found under the Pleiades in Taurus at the beginning of April. If you find the “Seven Sisters” in binoculars and make your way south from there, you will come across Uranus as a grey-green tiny desk, separated from the cluster by around 4 1/2°. The meaningful observing window for Uranus is closing for us, as the planet dips below the 30° level for many temperate northern hemisphere observers before the onset of astronomical dusk and true darkness. Still, even if the sky is not perfectly dark, it is more than possible to find Uranus given the handy nearby sign post of the Pleiades. The observing window will grow shorter and shorter as the month progresses, so catch Uranus while you can, as its Superior Conjunction will occur in the latter half of May.

Neptune is emerging from late March’s Superior Conjunction, on the morning side of the Sun. As the planet is significantly fainter than Uranus, it is completely lost in the glare of dawn during April and it will be sometime before separation from our parent star allows for meaningful observation again.

Uranus and Pleiades 1st April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

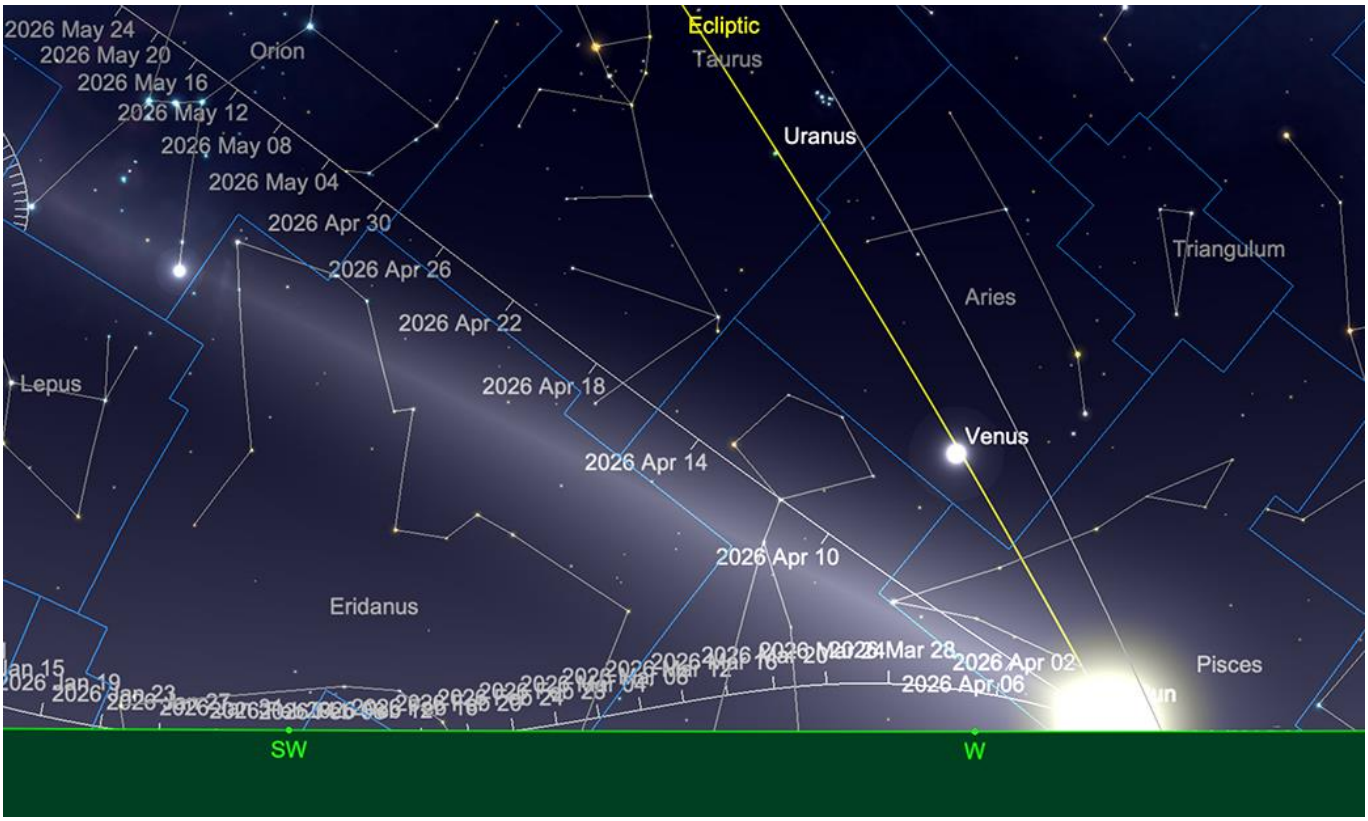
Comets

There are two potentially bright comets to observe this April. The first, Comet C/2026 A1 (MAPS) offers a potentially dramatic, yet challenging spectacle for Northern European observers throughout April 2026. At the beginning of the month the comet remains practically invisible to ground-based observers as it reaches its closest approach to the Sun on 4th April. During this period it moves rapidly through Pisces while remaining obscured by intense solar glare.

By mid-month the comet emerges into the evening twilight in the constellation of Aries. If the nucleus survives its fiery passage it may display a prominent tail low in the west-southwest roughly thirty minutes after sunset.

Towards the end of the month the comet moves into Taurus and begins to fade as it recedes from the inner solar system. Successful observation requires an unobscured westerly horizon and the use of binoculars to sweep the sky beyond the onset of civil twilight. Locations away from urban light pollution and coastal haze provide the best chance of observational success.

The visibility of this Kreutz sungrazer is highly dependent on its structural integrity, after passing within 162,000 kilometres of the solar surface. Ephemeris data from the British Astronomical Association and NASA indicates that post-perihelion observations are most viable after perihelion in early April and mid-month. During this window the comet will be situated at a very low altitude. Observers should look for a "headless wonder" effect where the tail is visible, even if the nucleus remains below the horizon. By 30th April the comet's brightness will have diminished significantly as it moves towards the constellation of Orion. It is very unlikely that the comet will appear quite as prominent as the Sky Safari image used to illustrate it below. It could be that the object evaporates completely. As with any comet, we hope for the best, but prepare ourselves for a healthy dose of reality**.**



Comet C/2026 A1 (MAPS) path through April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Another interesting object is comet C/2025 R3 (PANSTARRS). This again has the potential to become a naked eye object, though the size of variability of maximum magnitude is quite large. The comet could be around 4th to 5th magnitude, but median light curves put it peaking around magnitude +0. The upper range of potential magnitude is an impressive -4.

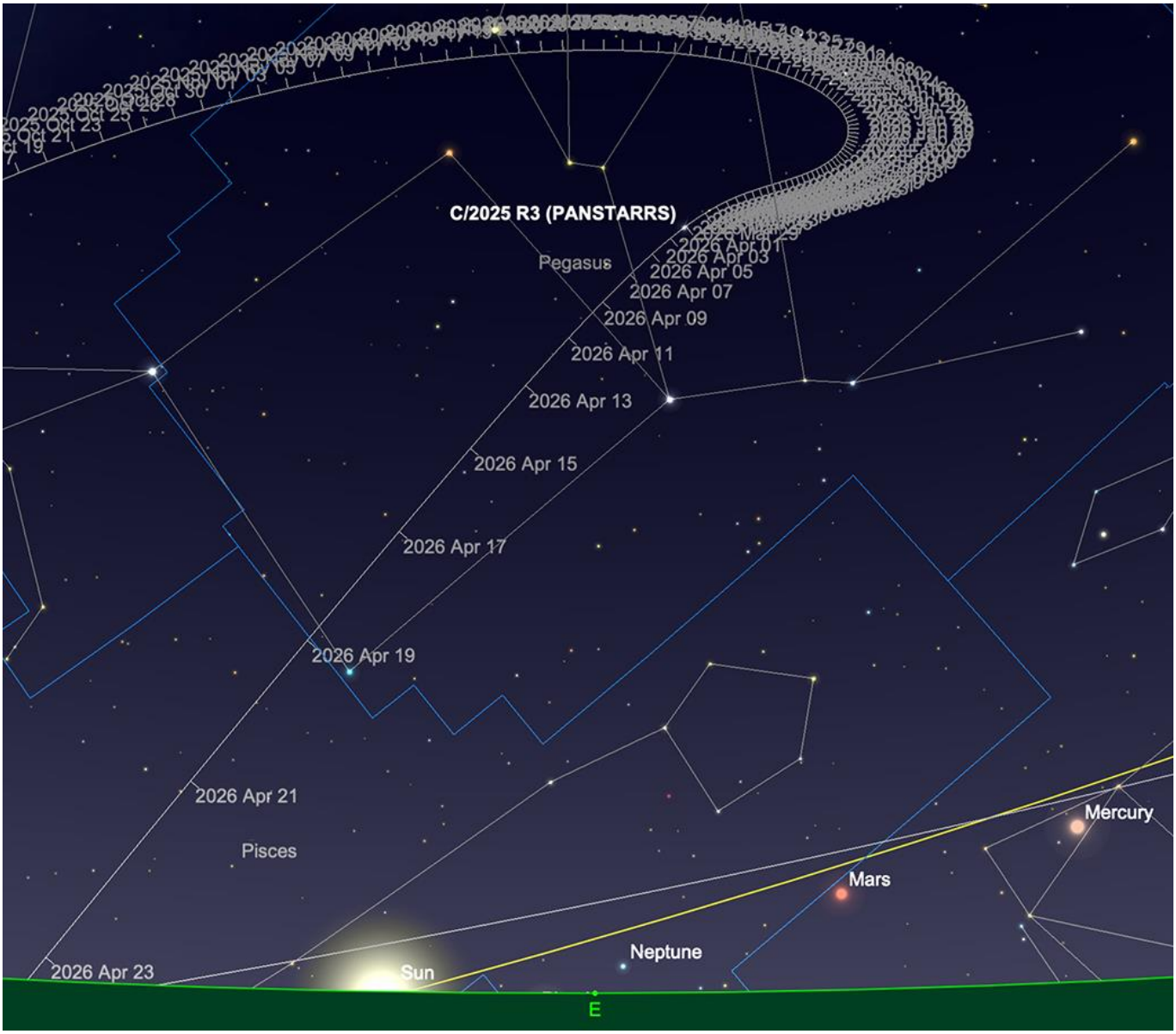
At the beginning of the month the comet is positioned within the Great Square of Pegasus and is best observed in the predawn sky. It currently presents as a magnitude +6 object, necessitating the use of binoculars for a clear view against the morning twilight.

By mid-month the comet is expected to brighten to magnitude 3 while traversing through Pegasus into Pisces. Observers should scan fifteen degrees above the eastern horizon, one hour before sunrise, to identify its emerging dust tail.

Following perihelion on 19th April the comet rapidly approaches solar conjunction and sinks into the intense glare of the Sun. Consequently, the end of the month offers very limited visibility from Northern Europe as the object remains extremely low in the dawn sky. Successful viewing will require an unobscured eastern horizon and low light pollution.

Ephemeris data from the Minor Planet Centre indicates the most favourable viewing window occurs between 5th and 18th April. During this interval the comet maintains sufficient altitude to be distinguished from atmospheric extinction, before sunrise. Although forward scattering may significantly enhance the brightness of the tail around 25th April, its extreme proximity to the Sun will make such features difficult to capture from higher northern latitudes.

Again, quite how bright this comet ends up being is still unknown. But it is positive to have two reasonable cometary possibilities to contend with this month.



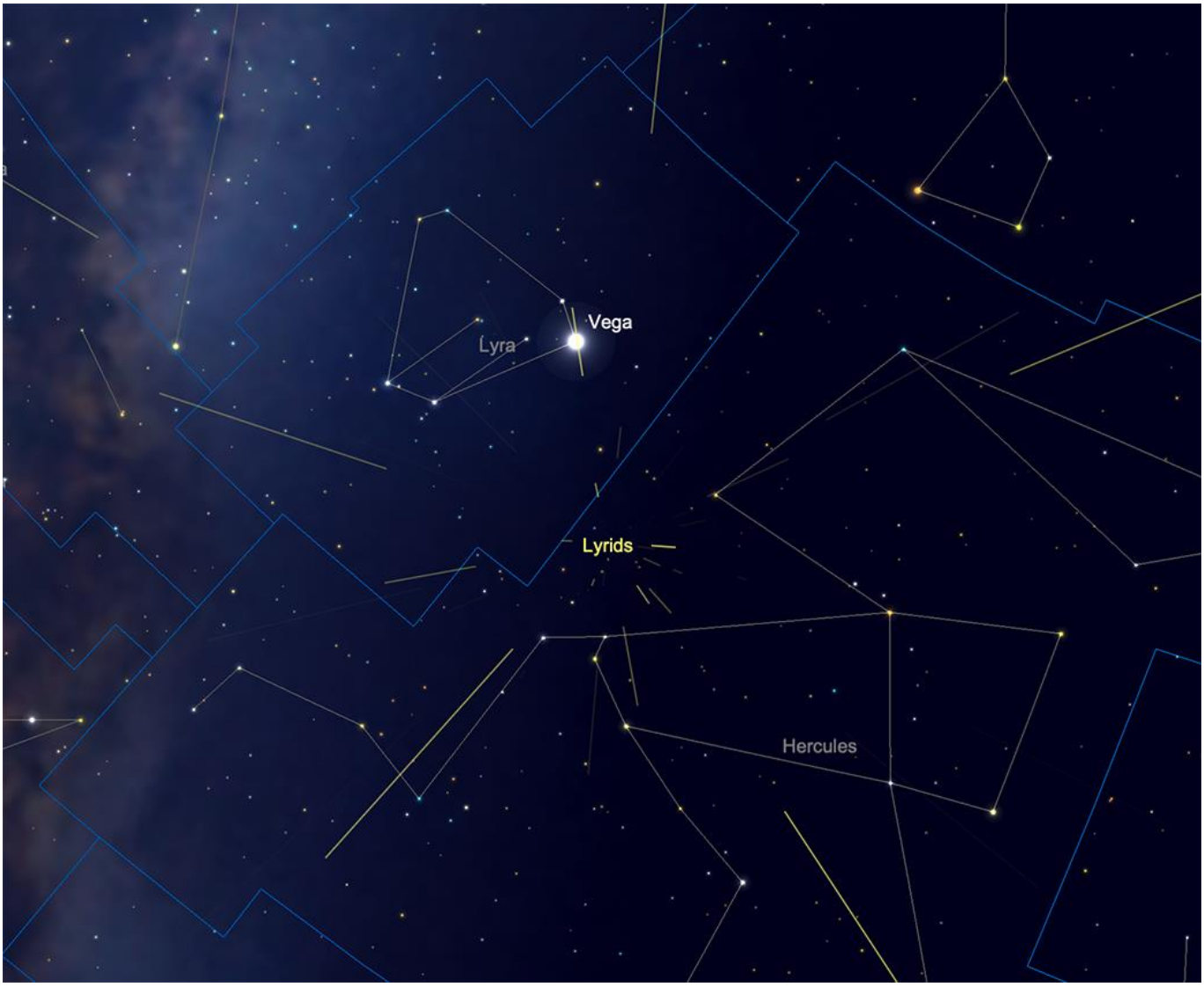
C/2025 R3 (PANSTARRS) path through April. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Meteors

Peaking on the night of 21st–22nd April, the Lyrids are a reliable annual fixture. While rarely as spectacular as some major showers, they remain well worth observing. The meteor shower emanates from an area of sky in between Lyra and Hercules, though it must be noted that meteors can appear in any part of the sky, radiating from this point.

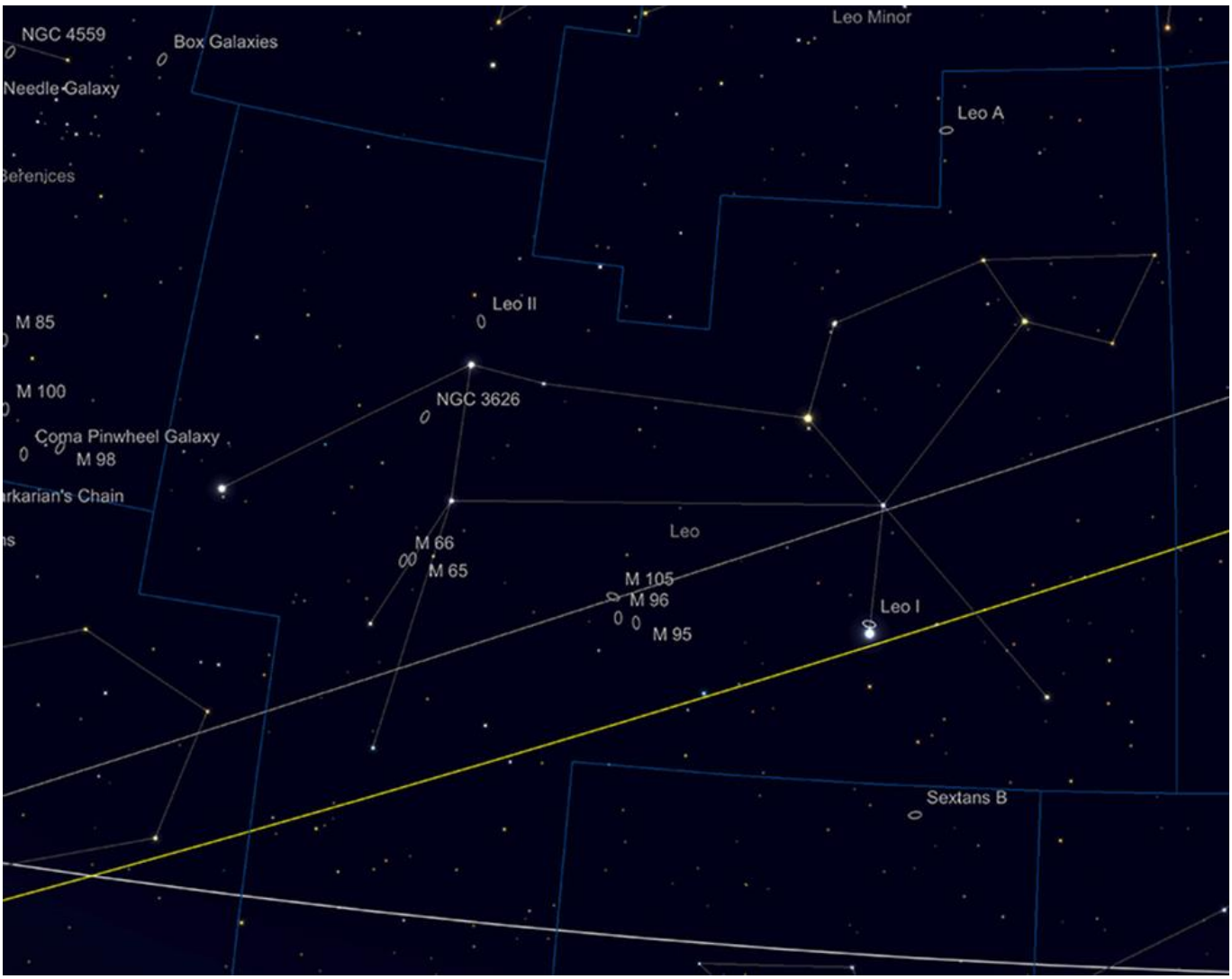
During the 2026 peak the waxing crescent Moon sets before the radiant reaches its highest point, providing dark skies for the pre-dawn hours.

Originating from comet C/1861 G1 (Thatcher), which returns in 2276, these fragments strike the atmosphere at 48 kilometres per second. Their modest kinetic energy and small grain size typically result in an average magnitude of +2.0. Although rare historical outbursts have reached hundreds per hour, the typical zenith hourly rate is approximately 20. Clear conditions may allow the brightest meteors to be recorded using short-exposure DSLRs or USB imagers equipped with All Sky Lenses.



The Lyrid radiant, on the borders of Lyra and Hercules. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Deep Sky Delights: Galaxy Season Part 2 - Leo



The constellation of Leo. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

When gazing towards Leo, there can be little doubt we are now in the part of the year known as "Galaxy Season", as this area of sky is littered with them. Galaxy hunting is not solely the preserve of those with the supposedly prerequisite "Big Dob". Although to see much in the way of detail in many of the objects mentioned this month, aperture will certainly help, a good deal of these can be seen with smaller telescopes and large binoculars from decent, dark observing sites. However, patience and care will be needed to pick the faint glow of these fantastically distant objects from the background sky. However, to discern structure in many of the galaxies we will cover requires one of two things: a large telescope of at least 10-inches of aperture (preferably more), or reliance on accurate, autoguided long-duration exposure astrophotography. To appreciate the true beauty of these massive, yet seemingly delicate structures, you need one or the other - though their location and observation (yet again), will largely be down to sky conditions - with galaxies, the darker the better! Careful, gentle filtration will help with galaxy observation from more light polluted environments, but narrowband filters like the OIII, H-Alpha and others will rarely help as much for galaxy observation as they do for nebulous objects (except when a galaxy has particular emission regions, peculiar to these wavelengths of light). A good Skyglow, CLS or broader "Deep Sky" filter will help increase the contrast of an object against the background sky, without cutting off many of the useful wavelengths that the galaxy is transmitting on. A galaxy's spectral output is much broader than typical nebulosity, so gentle filtration produces the best results.

The first object on the list for observation is one of the most difficult to see, but probably one of the simplest to locate and the closest, galaxy-wise - the Leo I galaxy. Leo I sits a third of a degree north of Regulus, Alpha Leonis - the principle star of Leo (though some publications rate it as closer). Leo I is an elliptical galaxy of reasonable angular size (12 x 8.5 arc minutes) and of photographic magnitude +11.15. Leo I is a one of its furthest satellite galaxies of our own Milky Way, lying just over 800,000 light years from us. Leo I was first detected in the Palomar Sky Survey, taken with the observatory's 48-inch Schmidt Camera in 1950. Leo I's visual magnitude is deemed to be around +9.8 mag, which should put it easily within the reach of amateur instruments. However, Leo I's easy-to-find location is also its potential downfall from a visual perspective: it lies so close to Regulus that the neighbouring galaxy is almost drowned out by its glare. There are reports of the galaxy being found in 10-12-inch class telescopes, but it is very likely that an observer would have to place Regulus just outside of the field of view, using appropriate magnification, in order to see our galaxy's most distant satellite at all. Leo I will appear as a misty oval of light, with no great discernible structure even in large telescopes. The galaxy appears to have no attendant globular clusters and contains few stars of advanced metallicity, meaning the stellar population is comparatively young - probably little over twice the age of the Sun. The galaxy is surrounded by a halo of attendant gas, which it may (or may not) have formed from.

This unusual object will be a challenge, but if found, you will be witnessing the furthest reaches of our own galaxy's orbital sphere of influence and in all likelihood its youngest attendant.

Roughly nine degrees east of Leo I lie a spectacular grouping of galaxies: the Messier objects M95, 96 and 105 (and its attendant galaxies NGC 3377 and NGC3384). This group occupies a compact area of sky (about 3 x 1.5 degrees of sky) and can be found halfway on a line drawn between Regulus and Iota Leonis - one of the rear legs of Leo. Of the three galaxies,

the beautiful M95 is the most Westerly. M95 is a barred spiral galaxy, placed almost face-on from our perspective. M95 was discovered - along with the nearby M96 - in 1781, by Pierre Mechain. Messier catalogued both objects less than a week after Mechain found them. At +9.69 mag, M95 is a relatively easy, compact object at 7.4 x 5 arc minutes in dimension. Lying 31 million light years away from us, it is the closest of its group by a million light years. As M95 is a barred spiral, it is likely that most observers with decent-sized telescopes will see the galaxy's central core region as a slightly elongated object, surrounded by a fainter haze of its arms. Long duration images of the system reveal its structure in all its glory - the two massive spiral arms shedding stars into further outlying feathered lesser arms. If, as it has been suggested, our own galaxy is a barred spiral, it could look much akin to M95 to outside observers, though our galaxy may have more in the way of outlying spiral structure in its arms.

M95 and M96 by Mark Blundell. Image reproduced by kind permission.

Next door to M95 by a mere two-thirds of a degree is another lovely spiral, M96. A similar angular size to its neighbour, it is slightly brighter at +9.3 mag. In contrast to M95, M96 appears to be dustier, but has a more compact core. It is often listed as a double barred spiral. This double barring, along with the wide spread of its arms and the galaxy's dusty nature make its spiral structure less well-defined than its neighbour M95's. Similar in angular size to M95, at 7.8 x 5.2 arc minutes, M96 appears as a more compact 3 x 5 arc minute

object in a 10-12-inch-class telescope, its bright central core surrounded by a fainter ring of starlight which make up its arms. The reason it also appears slightly brighter than M95 in some listings is that the galaxy is considerably foreshortened in comparison to its neighbour. Some listings incline it as much as 53 degrees to our line of site, whereas M96 is also recorded as being at a less extreme 35 degrees! Whichever listing is correct, M96 is a great target for visual and photographic observations.

Just under a degree to the north of M96 sits the grouping of M105 and the nearby NGC 3384 and 3389. Of the three, M105 is the dominant and brightest at +9.3 mag. It is often described as the analogue of Elliptical galaxies - and as such is much studied. M105 is a later addition to the Messier list (added by 20th Century Astronomer Helen Sawyer Hogg), though discovered in 1781 by Mechain, Charles Messier did not confirm its discovery at the time and it was left out of his original listing. It's difficult to understand why Messier chose not to include M105, as it is prominent enough - a misty patch of light in small telescopes and a condensed glow, with a healthy-size core in larger instruments. Elliptical galaxies, but their nature are not generally thought to be as beautiful or as characterful as their spiral counterparts, but this should not put observers off trying to locate M105. Indeed, many Astronomers now consider Elliptical galaxies to be the ultimate evolution of galaxial structure after two spirals merge - the end result of the Milky Way's potential meeting with M31 may well result in a similar structure to M105. A clue to M105's past is that it contains few areas of star formation and a reasonably elderly stellar population, suggesting it is a more advanced galaxy in terms of age.

The second Elliptical in this close trio, NGC 3384, 7 arc minutes to the NE of M105, is almost as conspicuous as its neighbour at +9.89 mag, but is presented to us at a much more oblique angle. Appearing elongated, even in small telescopes, larger instruments can reveal a clear, bright core and the misty halo of NGC 3384's outer regions. So easy is it in comparison and proximity to M105, it is difficult to believe that Mechain and Messier overlooked it. William Herschel discovered it in 1784. Although listed as the catch-all description of an elliptical galaxy, the more precise description of NGC 3384 should be as a Lenticular. The galaxy has revealed a central bar structure in long duration astrophotography and like M105 shows an older star population than the mean average.

NGC 3389 is the most challenging of this trio to observe - whereas the two previously-mentioned ellipticals are bright and their structure obvious, NGC3389 is a whole two magnitudes fainter than either at +11.89 mag and much more the visual preserve of larger telescopes. NGC 3389 is a spiral galaxy and shows a much more blue, energetic cast in long duration images (maybe somewhat reminiscent of a mini M33). This is largely due to its disassociation with the group - although close in angular proximity to M105 and NGC 3384, NGC 3389 actually lies round 64 million light years distance, roughly twice that of its neighbours and has no connection to them. Instruments of the 10-inch+ range will show it, though it will be a struggle to observe in less powerful scopes. It appears as a pale misty patch to the SE of NGC 3384 and little detail is to be expected in most telescopes, though those owning larger instruments have reported a certain textured "lumpiness" to its appearance in the eyepiece.

At low power (sub x40) it is possible to squeeze M96, M105 and NGC3384 in the same eyepiece, as it is also possible to do with M95 and M96 - though owners of low focal ratio reflectors should be advised that it is often inadvisable to attempt to use such low magnifications, lest the shadow of the secondary mirror interfere with the view.

Leaving this group of galaxies aside, we return to the aforementioned Iota Leonis and trace a line back up one of the rear "legs" of Leo, until we come across the +3.34 mag star Chertan or Theta Leonis (sometimes known as Chort or Coxa). Tracing the line back to Iota Leonis, stop approximately halfway: here is location of the next group of galaxies, the M65 Triplet, more commonly known simply as the Leo Triplet. This triplet contains the Messier objects M65 and 66 and the elongated NGC 3628. All three objects are spiral structures, though unsurprisingly they present themselves to us in differing aspects.

M65 and 66 were discovered by Charles Messier in 1780, though their discovery is often misattributed to Mechain. Of the two, M65 is slightly smaller and fainter at + 9.30 mag. It has a bright central bulge and pretty luminous arms. Presented at a significant incline to our perspective, occupying an area of 9.8 x 2.9 arc minutes, M64 also features noticeable dusky lanes within its arms, though these may well be made more prominent by foreshortening. M66, on the other hand, is a broader barred spiral, brighter than its neighbour at +8.9 mag and taking up more area in the sky at 9.1 x 4.1 arc minutes. M66's spiral arms are not as regular as M65's, which seems to suggest total interactions with neighbouring NGC 3628 in the past, as does a displaced cloud of hydrogen, which has moved outwards, from its arms and now sits, motionless, around its galactic halo.

The Leo Triplet: M65, M66 and NGC3628, by Mark Blundell. Image reproduced by kind permission.

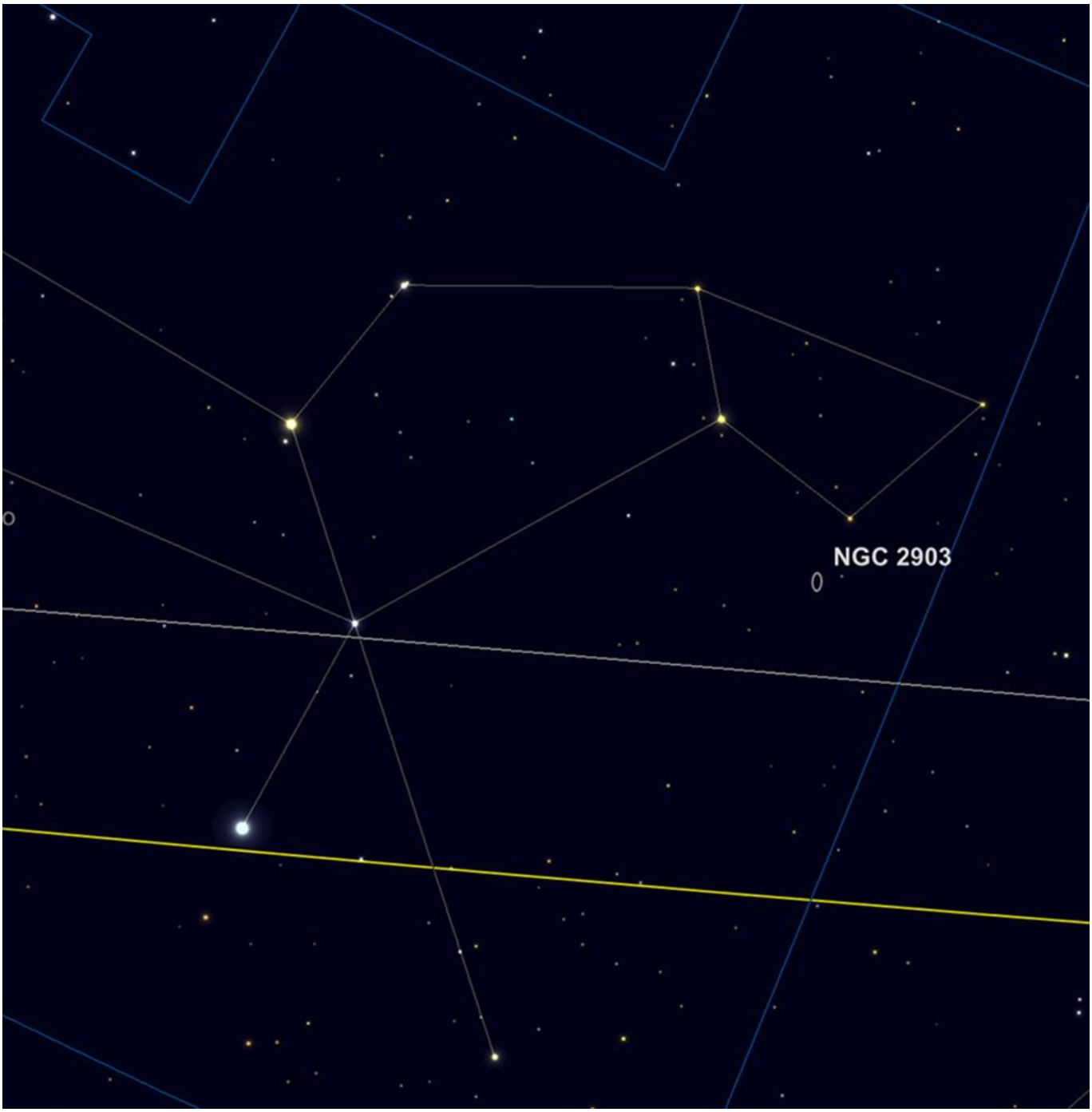
NGC 3628 is the faintest of the three at +9.50 mag and the longest at 13.1 x 3.1 arc minutes in dimensions. This is a fascinating spiral, which is presented edge on to us and is bisected through its centre by a long, dark dust lane. This is difficult in smaller telescopes, but becomes extremely prominent in larger telescopes. 10-12-inches of aperture will show it well, but in a telescope of 14-16-inches of aperture, it is unmistakable (in a similar way to NGC 891). Discovered by William Herschel in 1784, NGC 3628 is pretty obvious in relation to its neighbours, so again, it is mysterious why it wasn't discovered earlier. NGC 3628 has tidally interacted with M66, which has lead to a huge stream of stars breaking away in a staggering 300,000 light year long trail. This feature is only apparent in very long and well-processed astrophotographs, but is amongst the most spectacular and extreme pieces of evidence for gravitational interaction amongst galaxies in the sky.

All three galaxies can sit within the field of view of a low power eyepiece in a rich field instrument, but large binoculars will show them well as a triplet too. Sadly, NGC 3628's dark lanes won't be revealed by binoculars, but the Leo Triplet is well worth your attention, regardless of whatever optical aid you deploy.

All the galaxies mentioned so far, bar the outlying NGC 3384 and (confusingly) the much more local Leo I, are all members of the extended Leo I group of galaxies. For clarification, Leo I the galaxy and the Leo I group of galaxies are completely unrelated! The next group of galaxies we shall come to belong to the Leo II population, an associated, but separate group.

Moving Northwards from the M65 Triplet, we come to another compact triplet of galaxies, the spiral NGC 3632 and a close pairing of elliptical galaxies NGC 3607 and 3608. 2 1/2 degrees S from Zosma, Delta Leonis, (the base of the Lion's tale), the pairing of NGC 3607 (+ 9.89 mag) and NGC 3608 (+ 10.80 mag) can be found. Separated by just 5 arc minutes, the pair are easily located in small instruments, though it is the brighter (4.6 x 4.0 arc minutes) 3607 that is the more conspicuous. NGC 3632 is to be found three quarters of a degree to the east of this pairing. At+10.6 mag NGC 3632 was discovered by Herschel, again in 1784. It is a lovely, if compact, spiral and is also listed at number 40 on Patrick Moore's Caldwell Catalogue. Although recorded as an 11th magnitude object, it appears brighter due to the concentration of this light over its compact 2.7 x 1.9 arc minute area. Larger telescopes are needed to bring out any detail in its outlying spiral arms.

Finally, we come to a rather brighter galaxy, NGC 2903. This is a wonderful spiral structure and at magnitude 8.9, it is easily visible with a small telescope. With dimensions of 12.6 x 6.6 arc minutes, the galaxy is seen from a rather oblique angle, which contributes to its relatively high surface brightness. NGC 2903 is pretty easy to find, located as it is around 1 1/2 degrees below Leo's "chin" or "mouth" star, Lambda Leonis.



NGC2903 location - under the "chin" of Leo. Image created with SkySafari 5 for Mac OS X, ©2010-2016 Simulation Curriculum Corp., skysafariastronomy.com.

Sitting at a distance of 20.5 million light years, it is still fairly easy to see the dust lanes and emission nebulae. NGC 2905 is a prominent bright area in NGC 2903. NGC 2903 is thought to be about 80% as large as our own Milky Way Galaxy. The similarities continue with NGC2905's spiral structure and noticeable central bar. Hubble images show that NGC 2903's globular clusters seem somewhat brighter and more prominent than our Milky Way's globulars would be if viewed at a similar distance. This suggests they and their parent galaxy may be somewhat younger than our own.

NGC 2903 also appears very efficient in terms of star formation - its notable ring of material around its core being particularly rich in new stars. It is thought that the central bar's tidal forces are compressing this material and this is the driving mechanism behind this formation.

NGC 2903 by Mark Blundell. Image reproduced by kind permission.