

# February, oh February, why are you so short?

February, the year's shortest month, has an abundance of bright planetary conjunctions (groupings) this year.

All the activity will take place in the pre-dawn sky where Mercury, Venus, Mars and Saturn are located. The only planet visible will be Jupiter.

People often wonder why this month is so short when all other months are 30 or 31 days long.

February could have had 30 days if one day had been taken from January and another from March, resulting in three consecutive months of 30 days. The reason for the shortening can be blamed on politics in Roman times.

The ancient Roman calendar originally began with the month of March and ended with February. It was an imperfect calendar and, over the course of many centuries, was no longer in synchronization with the seasons. Calendar reform was badly needed.

The calendar would have been much easier to deal with if our year (the time it takes the earth to complete one orbit around the sun) were exactly 360 days long. There could be 12 months, each having 30 days. Unfortunately the earth takes 365.26 days to complete its orbit and those extra 5.26 days complicated matters.

IT WAS JULIUS Caesar who brought the calendar back into step with the seasons, decreeing that the months would alternate in length, having either 31 or 30 days. March, the traditional first month of the year, was given 31 days. April followed with 30 days, May had 31 and so on. By the time February, the last month of the year, rolled around there needed to be only 29 days to add up to a total of 365. February would have its full 30 days only once every four years to allow for leap year.

Being very pleased with the results, Julius Caesar named one of the months "July" to honor himself.

His successor was his nephew Augustus, who felt that he was entitled to have a month named for him as well, hence the month August. But because August followed a month of 31 days, it had only 30 days of its own. Believing he was every bit as good as Julius, Augustus decided that his month should have just as many days as July, so he took one day from February and added it to August. That left February with only 28 days, or 29 on leap years. At least that gets us one day closer to spring!

The amount of sunlight we receive will increase by one hour and 12 minutes in February. Sunrise on the 1st is at 7:46 a.m. and sunset is at 5:46 p.m. allowing for a possible 19 hours of sunlight. On the 28th the sun rises at 7:09 a.m. and sets at 6:21 p.m. for 11 hours and 12 minutes of sunlight.

MERCURY REACHES maximum elongation (apparent distance) from the sun on Feb. 1. The planet will be 25 degrees west (right) of the sun. Although this is a maximum elongation, Mercury will be only six degrees above the southeastern horizon about 45 minutes before sunrise.

It will be easier to spot bright Venus on the morning of the first. Venus, looking like a very bright star, will be 10 degrees above the southeast horizon. If you look at Venus with binoculars or a telescope it will look like a little crescent moon, about 7 percent full.

Mercury will be eight degrees below and to the right of Venus. Two degrees to the lower left of Mercury, only four degrees above the horizon, will be Saturn. The reddish "star" 22 degrees to the right of Venus is Mars.

When you look toward these four planets, you just also happen to be looking toward Uranus and Neptune. These two planets, however, are only going to be visible with binoculars or a telescope. Later this month it will be possible to use Mars as a guide to finding both Uranus and Neptune.

The moon is at First Quarter phase at 1:32 p.m. on the second. The moon is one-quarter of its way around the earth.

Mercury will be 0.3 degree north of (above) Saturn on the morning of the third. Both objects are still close to the horizon and difficult to see. Venus will be seven degrees to the upper left of Mercury and Saturn, and Mars will have moved slightly closer to Venus. Keep track of the changing positions of Venus, Mars and Saturn during the month.

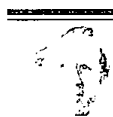
THE MOON is in the constellation of Taurus the bull on the evening of

the third. The Pleiades (PLEE-a-dees) star cluster, the "shoulder" of Taurus, is immediately to the right of the moon. Twelve degrees below the moon is the star Aldebaran (al DEE-ba-ran), the bull's "eye." The very bright star to the left of Aldebaran is the planet Jupiter.

The moon will form a large triangle with Jupiter and Aldebaran on the evening of the fourth. On the next night, the moon will be about three degrees above Jupiter.

The moon forms another triangle on Feb. 6. This time look for the "twin" stars Castor and Pollux in Gemini to the left of the moon. On the seventh a straight line is formed with Castor at the top, Pollux in the middle and the moon at the bottom.

Venus ends its retrograde (backward) motion on Feb. 7. A careful observer would have observed Venus drifting westward through the stars of Sagittarius from one morning to the next. On the seventh this back-



skywatch

Raymond E. Bullock

ward motion ends and Venus will now move eastward through Sagittarius.

The planet doesn't really reverse its direction. Retrograde motion is an optical illusion caused by the dif-

ference between the orbital speeds of Venus and the earth.

Mars will pass only 0.2 degrees south of (below) Uranus on the morning of the ninth. This will be an excellent opportunity to look for Uranus.

BECAUSE OF Uranus' distance to the sun (about 2,865,000,000 kilometers or 1,780,000,000 miles), it is very difficult to see with the naked eye, even under the best of conditions.

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