

# Moon does more than just play a role in romance



**SKY WATCH**

There will be no moon on Thursday. Now, don't panic; the moon isn't going to fall out of the sky. There's always one day each month when there is "no" moon. It's more commonly known as "new" moon, however, and it officially will occur at 9:30 a.m. on Thursday. The moon will be located between the earth and the sun and will not be visible.

The moon WILL be visible the evening after the new moon. Look toward the western horizon around 6:45 p.m. on the 11th, and you will see the thin "smile" of the moon grinning like the Cheshire cat. Use binoculars, look one degree (two moon diameters) to the left of the moon, and you should be able to see Mercury. That planet has been visible all month, but it will fade rapidly during the next few days.

The moon will have completed the first quarter of its orbit around the earth at 12:47 p.m. on Feb. 18. Although the first quarter phase is easily visible, it does not have the same significance as the new moon phase does for many cultures.

The moon will be in the constellation of Taurus the bull on the evening of the 18th. The eye of Taurus, marked by the orange-red star Aldebaran (al DEB a run), will be located below and to the left of the moon. Above and to the right of the moon will be the bull's "shoulder," marked by the Pleiades (PLEE a deens) star cluster. The Pleiades, which looks like a tiny "dipper," will be easier to spot with binoculars.

Notice how much the moon moves in just one night; on the following evening (Feb. 19) the moon will have moved 12 degrees (24 moon diameters) and passed Aldebaran.

Mercury will be at inferior conjunction on the 20th. The planet will be located between the earth and the sun and will not be visible. The only planet now visible in the sky will be Jupiter, and you will have to be up before sunrise to see it in the south southwest.

Notice the bright red star below and to the right of the moon on the evening of the 20th. This star is one of the most famous in the sky; its name is Betelgeuse ("Beetle juice"), and it was known long before the movie of the same name that starred Michael Keaton. The name means "Armpit of the Giant," and it marks that part of Orion's anatomy.

Betelgeuse is also known as Alpha Orionis; it is the brightest star in Orion, hence it was given the first letter of the Greek alphabet. Betelgeuse is the 11th brightest star in the sky, and it is one of the largest known. If placed where the sun is, Betelgeuse would easily extend beyond the orbit of Mars.

Estimates of the diameter vary from 550 to 920 times the size of the sun. The star certainly doesn't look like a giant because of its distance; it's believed to be about 520 light years away from us. That means the light we see tonight left Betelgeuse around the year 1474. (And of course EVERYONE knows that was one year after the birth of Copernicus!)

Saturn will be in conjunction with the sun on Feb. 21. The planet will be located behind the sun, as seen from the earth, and will not be visible.

The moon will be found within the constellation of Gemini the twins on the evening of the 21st. Notice the star directly to the right of the moon. It is the third brightest star in Gemini, hence it's known as Gamma Geminorum. Its proper name is given as both Alhena and Ameisam which means "a brand on the right side of the camel's neck." If nothing else, the Arabian skywatchers had imagination!

The moon will be approaching the star Regulus (REG u lus), the "heart" of Leo the lion, on the evening of the 24th. Look toward the east around 7:15 p.m.

Full moon phase will occur at 8:15 p.m. on Feb. 25.

The February full moon went by several names; some Native American Indians called it the Snow Moon, to others it was the Hunger Moon, still others named it the Wolf Moon. The full moon will have passed Regulus and will be rising nearly due east. It will be in this area of the sky that the sun will be rising in less than a month when spring arrives.

The planet Venus officially will

be in the evening sky at the end of the month, although it will be visible with difficulty. Try looking along the horizon, midway between due west and west southwest, with binoculars around 6:45 p.m. The glow of evening twilight will make finding Venus a challenge; the fact that the planet will be only four degrees above the horizon will add to the challenge. Venus will become better placed for easy viewing in March and will

remain in the evening sky through September. Jupiter, which has been drifting slowly eastward through the stars of Libra, will be stationary on Feb. 28 and then begin retrograde ("backward") motion. During the next four months the planet will drift 10 degrees (20 moon diameters) westward, crossing into Virgo. This "backward" motion is an optical illusion, caused when the faster moving earth passes be-

tween slower moving Jupiter and the sun. One hour and 30 minutes before the official end of February (10:30 p.m.), you will find the moon rising in the east southeast. "Riding" the moon, like a "cowperson" on a horse, will be the star Spica. Spica will be EXTREMELY close to the moon, near the moon's upper left edge. (Don't fret about a collision; Spica is a good 275 light years away.)

The bright glare of the moon will make seeing Spica difficult with the naked eye; use binoculars and try to spot Spica without looking directly at the moon. Looking at the moon will NOT harm your eyes, but the moon will be bright, and binoculars will magnify that brightness; that would certainly dazzle your eyes!

An excellent aid for learning constellations and keeping up to

date with the sky is the monthly 'Sky Calendar,' available from Abrams Planetarium, Michigan State University, East Lansing 48824. A one year subscription is \$7.50.

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