

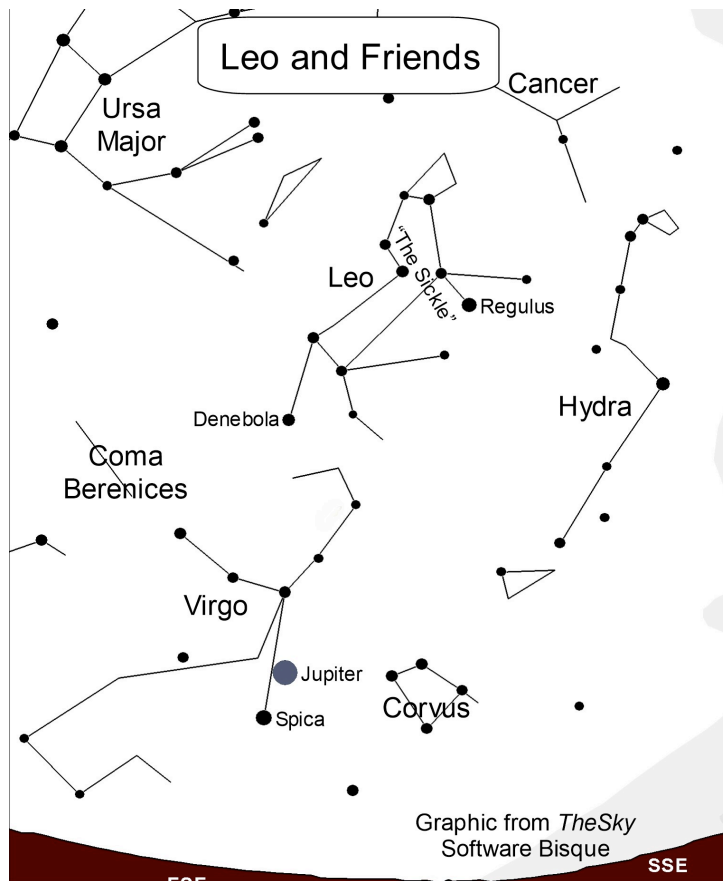


Mountain Skies

April 17, 2017

LEO CLIMBS IN THE EAST

The stars: We know spring is now in full swing as we watch Leo the lion climb higher in the eastern sky each night. See if you can spot a pattern traditionally referred to as the *sickle*. This marks the head and mane of the magnificent lion. The bottom of the sickle is marked by the star Regulus.



Regulus means the “little king” which is appropriate as it marks the heart of the king of the beasts and is sometimes called *Cor Leonis* or the “heart of the king.” The sickle is followed by a triangle of bright stars that mark Leo’s hindquarters. At the end of this triangle is the bright star Denebola or “tail of the lion.” In ancient times Leo was a much grander beast than we picture him now. His front legs extended into stars that now belong to Cancer the crab and his tail arched upwards ending in a characteristic tuft of hair now designated as Coma Berenices or Queen Bernice’s hair.

Below Leo is the Hydra the water snake, the longest constellation in the sky. Starting with its head just below the crab, this creature stretches to the east below Leo, Corvus the crow and Virgo the maiden. It wraps around nearly a third of the entire sky. Virgo herself is the longest of the thirteen zodiac constellations. The bright white star in the middle of Virgo is Spica with Jupiter lying above it. If you watch these two over the coming weeks, you will notice that Jupiter is slowly moving away from

Spica as the king of the planets moves around its retrograde loop. This is actually due mainly to the observer's motion on a moving Earth, not Jupiter's motion.

Lyrid Meteor Shower This year the Lyrids are predicted to reach a peak of about twenty meteors per hour around 6 a.m. EDT on the morning of Saturday, April 22. However, some Lyrids should appear for a day or so on either side of this date and Lyrids are likely to be spotted on the mornings of April 21, 22 and 23. As with all meteor showers, the Lyrids are best observed between midnight and dawn from a clear, dark location with a good horizon. Look to the northeast to find the meteors appearing to radiate out of the constellation of Lyra the harp. This year we have a waning crescent moon only 19% full on the night of the Lyrid Meteor Shower so there will not be significant interference from moonlight...

The planets: The planets have finally stopped their switching of morning and evening skies. Jupiter is now ensconced as our "evening star," rising low in the east just after sunset. On the opposite side of the sky, it is joined by the red planet Mars still visible, albeit fainter each week. Mars is putting on a show for us this week. The red planet will be passing just to the east of the beautiful Pleiades "Seven Sisters" star cluster on the shoulder of Taurus the bull. On Thursday evening the god of war will wave at the daughters of Atlas as he passes by. By the end of the month he will be just to the west of Aldebaran, the bright star that marks the eye of the bull. This star has a color similar to Mars but is brighter since the earth has left the red planet so far behind since the two were at their closest back on May 30.

Venus is now well established as our "morning star" rising higher in the morning twilight each dawn. It will soon be joined by the elusive Mercury which slips by the sun in *inferior conjunction* this coming Thursday.

Saturn is now the queen of the skies in the wee hours as it rises shortly after midnight and shines high in the south by dawn. If you can, take a look at it through a telescope and note its beautiful rings which are now opened almost to their maximum of 26°. As it moves to the west, i.e., in *retrograde*, it can be spotted in the western part of Sagittarius the archer.

Celestial Calendar:

April 19, 5:57 a.m. EDT – Last Quarter Moon

April 20, 2 a.m. EDT – Mercury passes through inferior conjunction, moving from the evening twilight into the morning twilight.

April 22, 2 a.m. EDT - Peak of the Lyrid Meteor Shower

April 26, 8:16 a.m. EDT – New Moon