

Pluto sends its long-distance love

Q-C SKY WATCH

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Valentine's Day is approaching, and Pluto is showing us some love.

When the New Horizons spacecraft sped by Pluto in July 2015, the images it took revealed a heart-shaped pattern on the surface. So despite its demotion to dwarf planet in 2006, Pluto still sends its love to Earth.

Unfortunately, this heart can't be observed from Earth because we do not have a big enough telescope. But there are other things that easily can be observed with the naked eye this month.

Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn will be in the predawn sky through Feb. 20. The last time this happened was 11 years ago; the next time will be in August 2018.

Early on, the moon can be used as a guidepost to find some of the planets:

► **Monday:** Mars will be the reddish object just below the moon.

► **Wednesday:** The moon will be right above Saturn; look to the left and down to see the ringed planet.

► **Saturday:** The moon will form a triangle with Venus and Mercury. Venus will be the bright object to the right; Mercury will be the dot of light just below the moon.

To find Jupiter, look almost due west and up about 25 degrees. The gas giant will be the brightest object in that part of the sky.

If you really want to impress your friends, tell them they can see six planets — just have them look down at their feet and see Earth! Six planets by just getting up early in the morning.

If you don't want to get up early, you can see my favorite constellation — Orion, the Hunter — in the evening. This one is easy to find by just looking south. You will see three stars in a row. This is the belt of Orion.

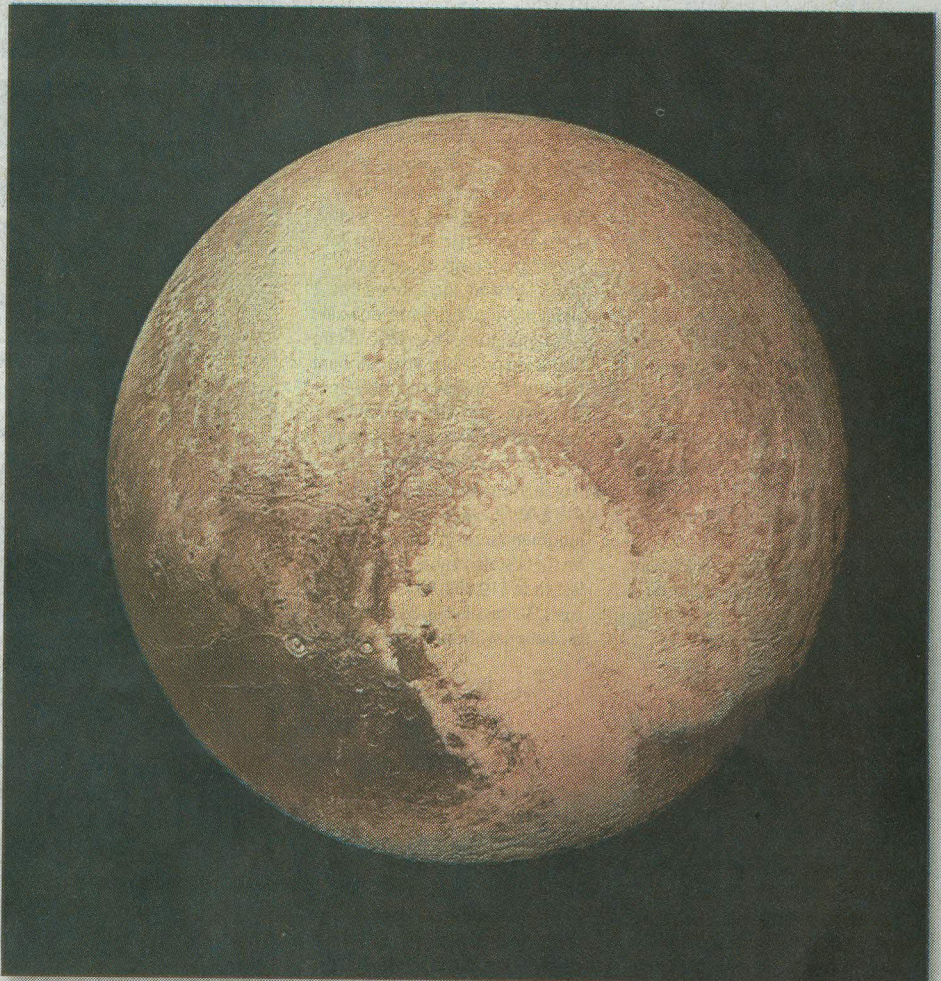


Photo by NASA via AP

This image of Pluto was made by NASA by combining several images from two cameras on the New Horizons spacecraft. The images were taken when the spacecraft was 280,000 miles away from Pluto and reveal a heart-shaped pattern on the surface of the dwarf planet.

Look up and to the left of the first belt star and there will be an orange star. This is Betelgeuse, a super red giant star in the armpit of Orion. This star is several times larger than our sun. If we replaced our sun with Betelgeuse, Earth would orbit inside that star!

Across from Betelgeuse is another star of Orion named Bellatrix, which forms the right half of the hunter's

upper torso. Below the belt stars are two more stars roughly even with Betelgeuse and Bellatrix. On the left is Saiph and, on the right, the bright star Rigel. They complete the constellation.

If you draw a line through the three stars of the belt and extend it toward the horizon, you will come to the brightest

Pluto: Five planets will be visible in predawn sky

From page **C1**

star in the night sky, Sirius. Sirius is in the constellation of Canis Major, a hunting dog of Orion. If you look above and to the left of Sirius, you will see another bright star, Procyon, in the constellation Canis Minor, the other hunting dog of Orion.

If we draw lines between Betelgeuse, Sirius,

and Procyon, we form a triangle. This is called the winter triangle. Now we extend our line from Orion's belt the other way, we come to a "V" of stars. This is the face of the constellation Taurus, the bull.

To the right of the "V" is a grouping of stars called the Pleiades. This looks like a small dipper, but this is a star cluster of six stars seen with the

naked eye and hundreds of stars seen through a telescope.

Pleiades is an open star cluster more than 400 light years away. The light we see tonight left this cluster when Galileo first started to use his telescope in 1609.

For a romantic evening — or morning — take your sweetie for a walk on Valentine's Day and see our amazing night sky.