

Lots to see in February skies

Sara Sheidler, Popular Astronomy Club, Feb 13, 2020



Although February brings cold, snow, and clouds to the Midwest, it also offers some great astronomical viewing on those infrequent clear evenings and early mornings. As far as planet viewing, there are four planets to watch in the evening sky and three in the early morning sky before sunrise.

Early February, 30 minutes after sunset finds bright [Mercury](#) easily visible low in the southwestern sky. Slightly higher and to the left of Mercury is dazzling [Venus](#) which is another easy to spot planet in the sky. By Feb. 10 Mercury has climbed to its highest point and then will dip lower to the horizon on each passing night. Venus however continues to climb throughout February. If you have binoculars or a small telescope you might be able to find dim blue-gray [Neptune](#) just below Venus early in the month. By mid-February Neptune will no longer be visible as it sinks below the horizon. [Uranus](#) is a bit easier to spot since it is seven times brighter than Neptune. This elusive blue-green planet can be found once you've found Aries the Ram in the southwestern sky. If you've been following Venus as it moves upward each night, Uranus is also moving downward and the two planets will have a close encounter the second week of March.

Now we'll switch to the morning planets we can see in February. Looking to the southeast about three hours before sunrise you should be able to spot Mars with its distinctive reddish hue. It will be visible all month long. Jupiter will rise just to the left of Mars with Saturn closely following. They will all be low to the horizon so an unobstructed view to the southeast is needed. On February 18 shortly before dawn an interesting event called an occultation will occur. The waning crescent Moon will slide in

front of Mars and completely cover it for nearly one and a half hours starting at 6 a.m. Binoculars or a small telescope will reveal more detail as this interesting event unfolds.

February is also an excellent month for viewing more deep sky objects including open clusters. A few of these spectacular objects are the [Beehive Cluster](#) (M44), the [Pleiades](#) (M45), and the splendid Double Cluster in Perseus. There are 18 open clusters visible in February! Globular clusters can be viewed much later in the night. Speaking of globular clusters, if you'd like to learn more about them then plan on coming to the Popular Astronomy Club monthly meeting on Feb. 10 at 7 p.m. at the Butterworth Center, Moline, Illinois as that will be the topic that night. Everyone with an interest in Astronomy is welcome to attend our meetings. For more information please visit our website: www.popularastronomyclub.org.