STAR CHART FOR MID-LATITUDES OF THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE

# What's Out Tonight?

**OPTIMIZED FOR 1½ HOURS AFTER SUNSET**
but can be used after that for several more hours.

## February 2028 Sky Chart

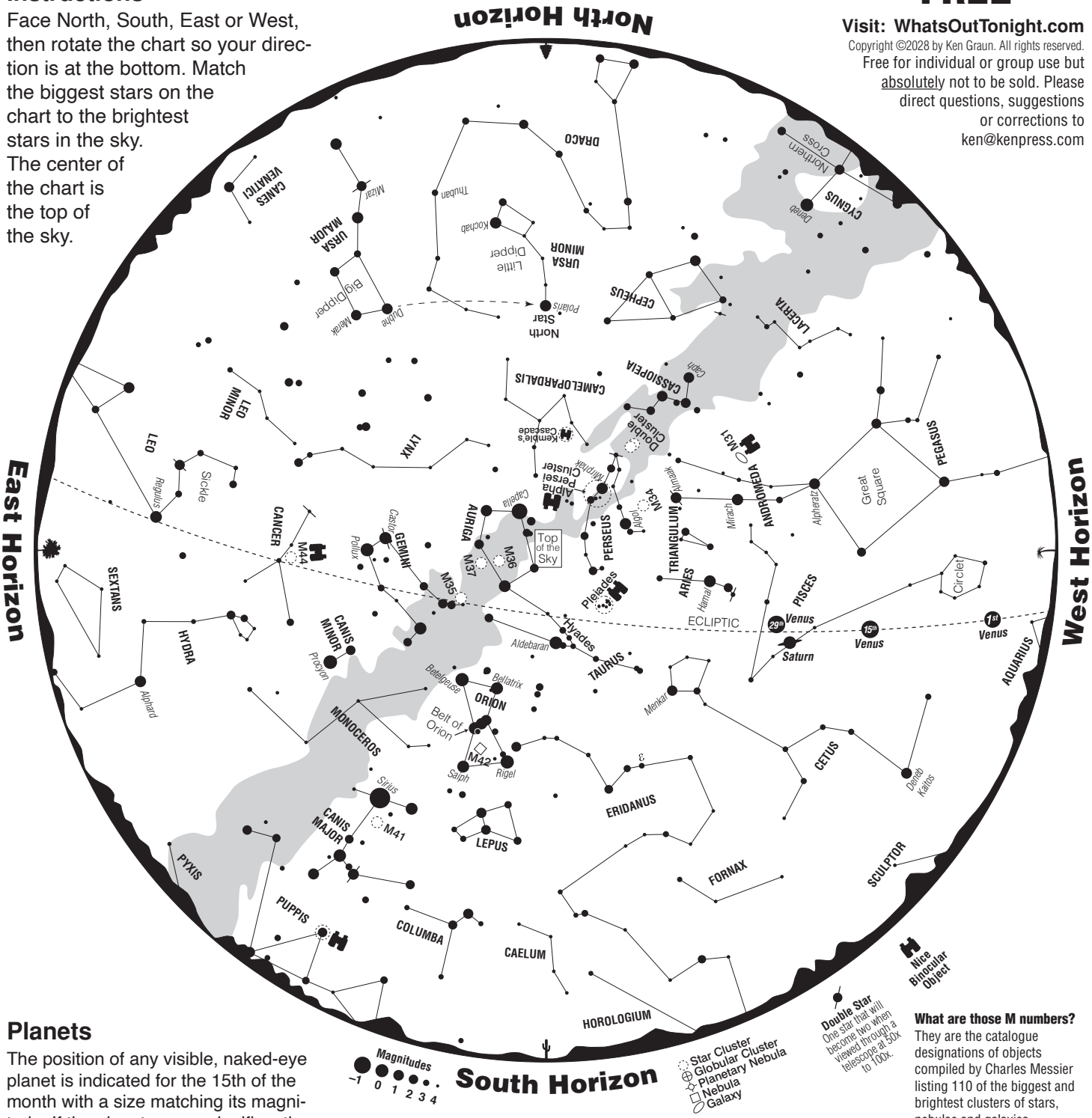
### Instructions

Face North, South, East or West, then rotate the chart so your direction is at the bottom. Match the biggest stars on the chart to the brightest stars in the sky. The center of the chart is the top of the sky.

**FREE**

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### Planets

The position of any visible, naked-eye planet is indicated for the 15th of the month with a size matching its magnitude. If the planet moves significantly during a month, other positions will be noted with dates. The **ECLIPTIC** is the path of the Sun through the sky but the planets and Moon move along it, too. It passes through the constellations of the zodiac.

**What are those M numbers?**
They are the catalogue designations of objects compiled by Charles Messier listing 110 of the biggest and brightest clusters of stars, nebulae and galaxies.

### February 2028 Planet Notes (15th of each month)

**Venus,** at magnitude –4.2, sets in the west 2 hours after sunset. **Mars,** at magnitude +1.1, in Capricornus, sets in the west 30 minutes after sunset. **Jupiter,** at magnitude –2.4, in Virgo, rises in the east at 8 pm. **Saturn,** at magnitude +0.6, in Pisces, sets in the west at 10 pm.

Distances planets are from Earth the 15th of this month:
**Venus**: 90,000,000 miles, **Mars**: 218,000,000 miles
**Jupiter**: 423,000,000 miles, **Saturn**: 910,000,000 miles.

## February Notes

The bright Winter constellations of CANIS MAJOR/MINOR, ORION, GEMINI, TAURUS and AURIGA dominate the southern sky with Orion sitting due south, home to the Great Orion Nebula. Orion's *Betelgeuse*, with *Sirius* and *Procyon,* form the **Winter Triangle**. The three stars, *Mintaka*, *Alnilam* & *Alnitak* (from highest to lowest) form the **Belt of Orion** and point to *Sirius*. Near the western horizon, "tilted" and looking more like a diamond, is the **Great Square**, part of PEGASUS. Rising in the east is LEO with its reverse question mark (the Sickle) punctuated by the kingly star, *Regulus*. Nearby is CANCER containing the Beehive cluster, a very nice sprinkle of stars seen easily with binoculars.

## SELECTED Clusters, Nebulae, Galaxies +

ly = Light Year, a unit of distance. 1 ly = 6 trillion miles.
Our Moon (and Sun) spans 30' (30 arc minutes) or 1/2°.

- **Alpha Persei Cluster**. Distance: 600 ly / Diameter: 31 ly / Mag 1.2 / Spans 3° / 30 stars. In PERSEUS.
- **Andromeda Galaxy**. Companion to our Milky Way Galaxy. Distance: 2,400,000 ly / Diameter: 120,000 ly / Mag 3.5 / Spans 3° x 1°. In ANDROMEDA.
- **Castor Double Star**. Favorite double star. Need a telescope with 50x to 100x to see Castor separate into two stars. Magnitudes of two stars are 1.9 and 3.0. In GEMINI.
- **Double Cluster**. Two side-by-side clusters. Distances: 7,200 ly / Diameters: 63 ly / Mag 3.5 / Span 1° / 320 stars total. Best in a telescope but visible with eyes in dark skies. In PERSEUS.
- **M35**. Cluster. Distance: 3000 ly / Diameter: 24 ly / Mag 5 / Spans 28' / 200 stars. In GEMINI.
- **M34**. Large Cluster. Distance: 1,400 ly / Diameter: 14 ly / Mag 5.2 / Spans 35' / 60 stars. Try with binoculars, too. In PERSEUS.
- **M36**. Cluster. Distance: 3,700 ly / Diameter: 13 ly / Mag 6.0 / Spans 12' / 60 stars. Try with binoculars, too. In AURIGA.
- **M37**. Cluster. Distance: 4,200 ly / Diameter: 29 ly / Mag 5.6 / Spans 24' / 150 stars. Try with binoculars, too. In AURIGA.
- **M42**. **Orion Nebula.** Brightest nebula in the northern sky. About 30 ly in diameter and 1,760 ly away. Mag 4 / Spans 1°.
- **M44**. **Beehive** Cluster. Distance: 610 ly / Diameter: 16 ly / Mag 3 / Spans 1.6° / 50 stars. In CANCER.
- **Pleiades**. Cluster. Spans about 2° in sky or 4 Moon diameters. To the eyes, it looks like a little dipper but it is NOT the Little Dipper! Distance: 440 ly / Diameter: 15 ly / Mag 1.2 / 100 stars. In TAURUS.

## Observing Tips for above Objects

If possible, observe at a dark location and when the Moon is not bright. A bright Moon will make it more difficult to see the stars and impossible to see clusters, nebulae and galaxies. Only a small telescope at lower magnifications, around 50x, is required to see the objects listed above. The planets and Moon are best observed with a telescope around 50x or more! To get a feel for the size of objects, the Moon extends 30' (30 arc minutes). The binocular objects are best with binoculars because these objects are large in size—telescopes have too much magnification.

## Meteor Showers

Next up are the **LYRIDS** which peak around **April 22** with 15–20 meteors/hour.

## Brightest Stars

**Aldebaran**. In TAURUS. Magnitude +1. Distance: 65 ly. Orange Giant star 45 times the diamter of our Sun.

**Betelgeuse**. In ORION. Magnitude +0.56. Distance: 428 ly. Red Supergiant with a diameter 650 times the Sun's.

**Capella**. In AURIGA. Magnitude +0.1. Distance: 42 ly. Diameter: 15 times the Sun's. It's actually 4 orbiting stars.

**Castor**. In GEMINI. Magnitude +1.6. Distance: 52 ly. Favorite double star that is twice the diameter of the Sun.

**Mirach**. In ANDROMEDA. Magnitude +2.1. Distance: 199 ly. Diameter: 89 times the Sun's.

**Mirphak**. In PERSEUS. Magnitude +1.8. Distance: 592 ly. Diameter: 64 times the Sun's.

**Polaris**. In URSA MINOR. Magnitude +2. Distance: 431 ly. 2,400 times brighter than the Sun. Supergiant star.

**Pollux**. In GEMINI. Magnitude +1.2. Distance: 34 ly. Diameter is 8.8 times the Sun's & 46 times brighter.

**Rigel**. In ORION. Magnitude +1.3. Distance: 3200 ly. Diameter: 222 times the Sun's. Blue-White Supergiant.

**Sirius**. Rising in CANIS MAJOR. Magnitude –1.44. Distance: 8.6 ly. The very brightest star in the whole sky but some planets, like Jupiter and Venus, are brighter. It has a diameter 1.8 times that of the Sun and is 23 times brighter. 7th closest star to us.

## Mythology

FOR THE CENTRAL CONSTELLATIONS, NORTH TO SOUTH

King **CEPHEUS** and Queen **CASSIOPEIA** ruled Ethiopia. Their daughter **ANDROMEDA** is being rescued by **PERSEUS** from the Sea Monster, **CETUS**. Andromeda was to be sacrificed to Cetus because Cassiopeia boasted of her and her daughter's beauty.

**AURIGA**, the Charioteer supervised the royal livestock, including a goat that provided milk for growing Jupiter.

The Pleiades or Seven Sisters rise before **ORION**, out-of-reach of his amorous clutches. Orion is a great Hunter and battles the Bull, **TAURUS**. Below his feet is **LEPUS**, the Hare. At his back is the ultimate prize for any hunter, the Unicorn, **MONOCEROS**. His Big and Little Hunting Dogs, **CANIS MAJOR** and **MINOR** follow. **ERIDANDUS**, the River is before Orion, representing the water of life.

**GEMINI** is the warlike Twins, Pollux and Castor, protectors of seafarers. Pollux is immortal but Castor is not.

*Regulus*, the brightest star in **LEO**, the Lion has several meanings including regal, king and mighty. Before him is **CANCER**, the Crab sent to prevent HERCULES from killing the nine-headed **HYDRA** as one of his twelve labors toward a virtuous life.

## Moon Phases

- **First Quarter**. Thursday, **February 3**, 1:10 pm, CT
- **Full Moon**. Thursday, **February 10**, 9:03 am, CT
- **Third** or **Last Quarter**. Thursday, **February 17**, 2:08 am, CT
- **New Moon**. Friday, **February 25**, 4:37 am, CT

# What's Out Tonight?

### February 2028 Sky Chart

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# What's Out Tonight? • Sky Chart Supplement

## Clusters, Nebulae & Galaxies

An **Open Cluster** is a group of several to hundreds of stars that were born out of the same nebula cloud. A group often forms a pretty pattern. The Pleiades and Praesepe are great examples. Open clusters reside in our Milky Way Galaxy. Our Sun is no longer in its group.

**Globular Clusters** look like fuzzy balls because they contain tens of thousands stars held together by their mutual gravity. There are 150+ of them that surround our Milky Way Galaxy like a halo—about 30 brigher ones visible from the northern hemisphere. M22 in SAGITTARIUS and M13 in HERCULES are favorites.

A **Planetary Nebula** is an old term that has nothing to do with the planets. Instead, it is a round or symmetrical nebula that is the shed atmosphere of a dying star. At its center is a white dwarf star. When our Sun dies, it will create a planetary nebula. These objects have diameters of a few light years and are located in our galaxy. The Ring Nebula, M57, in LYRA is a favorite.

A **Nebula** is a giant hydrogen gas cloud that is located in our galaxy. Within these clouds, concentrations of gas can occur and gravitationally condense to form stars and accompanying planets. A set of stars created by a nebula is known as an Open Cluster. The Orion Nebula, M42 is a favorite.

**Galaxies** contain billions of stars. All galaxies are beyond our Milky Way Galaxy, where our Sun resides. When you are observing a galaxy, you are looking through our galaxy into the true depths of the universe. The Andromeda Galaxy, M31 can be seen with the naked eye.

**At arm's length...**



One thumb width is 4 Moon diameters.



Orion's height is one hand span.



The width of a fist spans the Big Dipper's bowl.

## Double Stars

A Double Star is a star that looks like one star but when magnified sufficiently (from 6x to 200x+), it separates into two or more stars. Some are very pretty because of contrasting colors. *Castor* in GEMINI is a favorite and *Albireo* in CYGNUS is very much enjoyed for its blue & gold colors.

## Moon

Starting from New Moon, the Moon cycles through phases every 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, 3 seconds. It is 2,160 miles in diameter and averages 239,000 miles from Earth. A New Moon is not visible in the sky because the Moon is positioned very close to the Sun. Solar eclipses occur at New Moon. The best time to observe the Moon is during a phase because the craters appear their sharpest near the terminator, the line that separates the lighted side (day side) from the dark side (night side).

**Cycle of Moon Phases**




## Planets

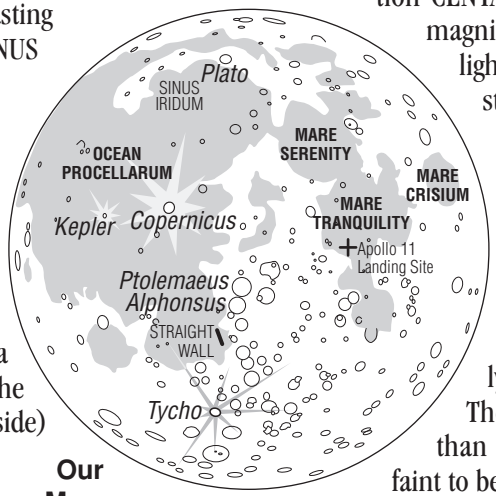
The planets are best observed with a telescope using magnifications from 50x to 250x but 100x+ is dependent on a steady night sky. The five naked-eye planets are Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Venus is the brightest "star" and hangs close to the Sun, so you see it for a short time in the west after sunset or in the east before sunrise. Jupiter can be out all night and always outshines any star. Everyone enjoys its cloud bands and four Galilean moons that are easily visible at 50x and possible with well-focused binoculars. Saturn has its beautiful rings. Mars gets close to Earth every 2 years at which time it is very bright. This is the best time to observe it but you need higher magnifications around 150x+ to more easily see the surface coloration.

| | Diameter In Miles | Rotation Its Day | Distance from Sun In Miles | Revolution Its Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUN | 865,000 | 30 days | — | — |
| **MERCURY** | **3,032** | **59 days** | **36,000,000** | **88 days** |
| VENUS | 7,521 | 243 days | 67,000,000 | 225 days |
| **EARTH** | **7,926** | **24 hours** | **93,000,000** | **365 days** |
| MARS | 4,228 | 24.6 hours | 142,000,000 | 687 days |
| **JUPITER** | **88,844** | **9.8 hours** | **484,000,000** | **11.8 years** |
| SATURN | 74,900 | 10.2 hours | 887,000,000 | 29 years |
| **URANUS** | **31,764** | **17.9 hours** | **1,800,000,000** | **84 years** |
| NEPTUNE | 30,777 | 19.2 hours | 2,800,000,000 | 164 years |
| **PLUTO*** | **1,433** | **6.4 days** | **3,700,000,000** | **248 years** |

*Demoted to a Dwarf Planet in 2006 because it is part of an outer debris field.

## Light Year (ly) & Nearest Stars

A Light Year (ly) is a *unit of length* and is equal to the distance light travels in 1 year. Since light moves at the speed of 186,282 miles a second, 1 light year is nearly 6 trillion miles long. The closest star visible to the naked eye is the southern hemisphere *Alpha* (α) *Centauri* or *Rigel Kentaurus* in the constellation CENTAURUS. It shines brightly at magnitude –0.27 and is just 4.4 light years away. The very closest star is *Proxima* in CENTAURUS at just 4.22 ly away but at magnitude +11, it's too faint to see with the eyes. The second closest star visible to the naked eye is *Sirius* at 8.6 ly followed by *Epsilon* (ε) *Eridani* at 10.5 ly and *Procyon* at 11.4 ly. There are several stars closer than these three but they are too faint to be seen with the naked eye.




Our Moon

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## Sky Charts

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# More Celestial Tidbit about . . .

## . . . the M-number Designations.

The Frenchman, Charles Messier, from Paris, during the mid-1700s compiled the very first catalogue of what is known today as Deep Sky Objects, which are clusters of stars, nebulae and galaxies. As the leading observational astronomer of his time he catalogued these non-stellar objects because such a catalogue did not exist, discovering a total of 110. Since he was the first to compile such a catalogue, his listing included most of the biggest and brightest objects that can be seen from the northern hemisphere—he used the equivalent of 4-inch diameter telescopes. Even though there are other, more comprehensive catalogues, Messier's is still used today but with an added M placed in front of his numbering. His catalogue serves beginning amateurs well as a first foray into observing Deep Sky Objects.

## . . . the Constellations.

There are a total of 88 constellations in the sky. Each constellation has a boundary. If you include the boundary areas, CRUX (visible from the southern hemisphere) occupies the least area and HYDRA the most.

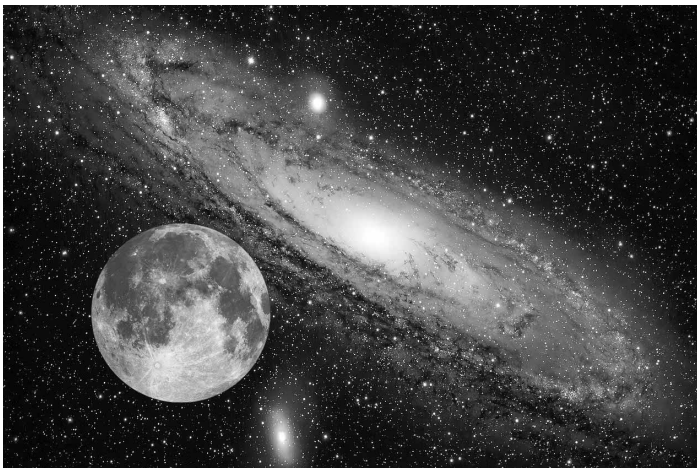
SERPENS is the only constellation that is split between two parts of the sky—on opposite sides of OPHIUCHUS. The eastern part is known as SERPENS Cauda (Cauda means tail) and the western part is known as SERPENS Caput (Caput means head).

In the northern hemisphere, we use the same constellations described by (visible to) the ancient Greeks, but a few have been added since then.

**Brightest Naked-eye Stars**

| | CONSTELLATION | MAG. |
|---|---|---|
| **Sun** | | **–26.73** |
| [Full Moon] | | –12.7 |
| **[Venus]** average brightness | | **–4.1** |
| [Jupiter] average brightness | | –2.2 |
| **Sirius** | **Canis Major** | **–1.46** |
| Canopus* | Carina | –0.72 |
| **Arcturus** | **Bootes** | **–0.04** |
| Rigel Kent* | Centaurus | –0.27 |
| **[Saturn]** average brightness | | **0.0** |
| Vega | Lyra | +0.03 |
| **Capella** | **Auriga** | **+0.08** |
| Rigel | Orion | +0.11 |
| **[Mercury]** average brightness | | **+0.23** |
| Procyon | Canis Minor | +0.34 |
| **Achernar*** | **Eridanus** | **+0.50** |
| [Mars] average brightness | | +1.0 |

*Southern Hemisphere



The Moon and the Andromeda Galaxy never get this close to one another in the sky, but this photo shows their comparative size. If Andromeda was very bright, as pictured, it would take 6 Moons to span its length. This image of the galaxy does not show the extremities of the galaxy. Many galaxies and nebulae span an area in the sky greater than that of the Moon, but because they are very faint, this evades attention and these faint objects do seem smaller than the Moon when viewed in a telescope—but they are not!

## . . . the Stars.

The names of many stars are derived from Arabic. About 5,000 stars can be seen with the naked eyes—this includes both hemispheres. With a good dark sky, many people can see to about magnitude +6. Stars twinkle because of turbulence in the atmosphere and twinkle most when low in the sky because their pinpoint light gets easily refracted from different and moving layers of the atmosphere.

**Greek Star Designations**. Many of the "brighter" stars in the northern hemisphere have an associated lowercase Greek letter designation. This starts anew with each constellation and usually with the brightest star designated alpha (α) and so on down the line. Of course, many of these designated stars are named, too. These Greek letter designations were assigned by Johann Bayer in the early 1600s.

## . . . the Milky Way.

The Milky Way Band is the faint glow from most stars that make up our Milky Way Galaxy. Our Sun and its accompanying solar system reside in the Milky Way Galaxy, which consists of hundreds of billions of stars all gravitationally bound to one another. The shape of our galaxy is that of a flat dish with a central bulge and having an overall diameter of around 100,000 light years. The direction to the center of our galaxy is between the constellations SAGITTARIUS and SCORPIUS, which happens to be the brightest part of the Milky Way Band. The Andromeda Galaxy is in the constellation ANDROMEDA, is a companion galaxy to ours, and can just be seen with the naked eyes under dark skies. If you could see its full extent, it would span 6 Moon diameters—there are plenty of pictures on the internet of this beautiful galaxy. Our galaxy and Andromeda are part of the Local Group of about 30 galaxies—most are on the smaller size. There are a few hundred billion galaxies in the Universe.


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