

'Tis the Season... for Mars

by Jim, December 2007

Every 2 years and several weeks, Earth catches up with the slower-moving Red Planet, our nearest outer planet. The close pairing occurs this year on December 18, with Mars just over 55 million miles from Earth. What this means is that the bright, orange-hued "star" visible high in the Eastern sky in the evening provides some spectacular views in a telescope. While it is often said that this is not our closest approach to Mars (which occurred in 2003), the fact that Mars rides high on the ecliptic during this year's opposition means that it climbs high enough in the sky so as to not be viewed through much atmosphere and haze. Late in the evening it is nearly overhead, marking the best time to observe it. Small telescopes will likely show the polar ice cap and some darker surface markings, but if you can visit a local observatory you may be treated to some spectacular views.

Coming up next week, on Christmas Eve, the full moon, my favorite full moon of the year, will join Mars in the evening sky for a memorable conjunction. If you live in the Northwestern US you will even see the moon pass in front of Mars.

Merry Christmas to all, and to all a clear night! Every 2 years and several weeks, Earth catches up with the slower-moving Red Planet, our nearest outer planet. The close pairing occurs this year on December 18, with Mars just over 55 million miles from Earth. What this means is that the bright, orange-hued "star" visible high in the Eastern sky in the evening provides some spectacular views in a telescope. While it is often said that this is not our closest approach to Mars (which occurred in 2003), the fact that Mars rides high on the ecliptic during this year's opposition means that it climbs high enough in the sky so as to not be viewed through much atmosphere and haze. Late in the evening it is nearly overhead, marking the best time to observe it. Small telescopes will likely show the polar ice cap and some darker surface markings, but if you can visit a local observatory you may be treated to some spectacular views.

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