

Caithness Skies

Planet Spotting (June '07)

As the summer nights shorten over the coming month we'll be treated to plenty of opportunities for evening views of the planets Venus, Saturn and Jupiter, with Mercury also joining the show for a short while. These planets are all visible to the naked eye and should be easy to identify, but unfortunately they will be quite low in the sky so a fairly clear horizon will be needed.

Venus, Saturn and Mercury (& occasionally the crescent moon) can be seen lined up in the north western sky shortly after sunset and the giant planet Jupiter can be seen rising to low above the southern horizon around midnight.

Venus dominates the sky with its brilliance and by early July will be seen as a small crescent shape through binoculars. It acts as a good pointer for the much fainter Mercury which is visible during the end of May and beginning of June. To find Mercury, wait until about 30-40 minutes after sunset and look along an imaginary line between Venus and where the Sun set below the horizon. If the weather conditions permit you'll find Mercury lurking there.



Venus & Mercury over Thurso (Feb '07)

The ringed planet Saturn can also be found to the NW after sunset, getting closer to the horizon as midsummer arrives. For the best view of the planet a telescope is needed, but even small of scopes will show off the system of rings. The tilt of the rings as viewed from Earth is closing, such that they will be almost invisible to us by 2009, so now is as good a chance as we'll get for a few years to come. If you have a telescope then the nights of 30th June and 1st July are not to be missed as Venus and Saturn will be close enough to be visible side by side through the eyepiece. Another good viewing opportunity is from the 17th to the 19th June when the crescent Moon will join the planetary pairing in this part of the sky.



Saturn
(Telescopic view, May '06)



Jupiter & its 4 brightest moons
(view through a small telescope)

Now finally to the largest planet orbiting our Sun – Jupiter. It can be seen popping up just above the horizon to the south over the next few months. With binoculars you'll be able to see its 4 brightest moons Io, Callisto, Ganymede and Europa. If you take a note of their positions you will see that they move around from one night to the next, performing a merry dance around the planet.

So if the weather permits why not do a bit of planet spotting over the coming month and if you have a digital camera try taking a photo or two – even a basic digital camera can get quite good result (see photo opposite).

If the weather doesn't play along then as an alternative have a look at the websites detailed below to see what our nearest celestial neighbours really look like.

G MacIe, May 19th '07



Crescent Moon & Venus over Thurso River

Related Web Links

<http://www.solarviews.com/eng/mercury.htm> Info and photos of Mercury

<http://sci.esa.int/science-e/www/area/index.cfm?fareaid=64> Venus Express Mission Website

<http://www.solarspace.co.uk/Jupiter/jupiter.php> Interesting Facts about Jupiter (well worth checking out the rest of the website too!)

<http://hubblesite.org/newscenter/newsdesk/archive/releases/2006/19/> Hubble Photos

<http://skytonight.com/observing/objects/planets/3304326.html> A Jupiter Observing Guide

http://skytonight.com/observing/objects/planets/Phenomena_of_Jupiter_s_Moons.html Observing Jupiters Moons

<http://saturn.jpl.nasa.gov/multimedia/poll/index.cfm> Photos from the Cassini mission

<http://saturn.jpl.nasa.gov/multimedia/images/image-details.cfm?imageID=1310> Photo of Titans surface

<http://skytonight.com/observing/objects/planets/3304811.html> Saturn Observing Guide