

What's Up – January 2024

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Sun and Moon

The Last Quarter phase of the Moon falls on the 4th of January at 05h30. The New Moon occurs on the 11th of January at 13h57. The First Quarter falls on the 18th of January at 05h52 and the Full Moon occurs on the 25th of January at 19h54.

The Moon will be at apogee (furthest from Earth) on the 1st of January at 17h28 at a distance of 404 909 km, and again on the 29th of January at 10h14 at a distance of 405 777 km. On the 13th of January at 12h34, the Moon will be at perigee (closest to Earth) at a distance of 362 267 km.

Planetary and Other Events – Morning and Evening

Jupiter is still visible after sunset and can be observed near the stars of the constellation Aries. Jupiter will be near the moon on the 18th of January. Saturn, the beautifully ringed planet, is also visible from sunset and can be observed near the stars of the constellation Aquarius. Saturn will be near the Moon on the 14th of January.

Venus can be observed in the morning before sunrise. They will be located near the stars of the constellation Scorpius (start of the month) and Sagittarius (end of the month). Mars and Mercury are also visible in the morning sky and may be found near the stars of the constellation Sagittarius. The Moon will be near Venus and Mars on the 8th/9th of January and the 10th of January, respectively.

The alpha-Centaurids, a meteor shower in the constellation of Centaurus, are active from the 31st of January to the 20th of February, peaking on the 9th of February. They are best viewed between 22h00 and 03h30 looking towards the constellation of Centaurus. Observing prospects are favourable, and the expected hourly rates are expected to be around 5 meteors per hour at the maximum.

The Evening Sky Stars

Low in the north in the evening are the stars variously known as the Seven Sisters, the Pleiades, or isiLimela. There are six stars in this cluster which are fairly easily visible to the naked eye, and hundreds that can be seen through a telescope. Located about 420 light years away, this is a group of stars which formed from a cloud of interstellar dust and gas about 120 million years ago. The Pleiades stars easily visible to the naked eye are all more than a 100 times as bright as our Sun – our own Sun only looks brighter because it is 27 million times closer to us! Above and to the right of the Pleiades is another cluster of stars called the Hyades, making up the muzzle of Taurus the Bull. The Hyades are about 150 light years away, and about 600 million years old. Bright orange Aldebaran looks as though it ought to be part of this loose group, but it is only located in the same direction and, at only 64 light years away, is less than half as distant. It is, however, the most luminous star within a hundred light years of us.

Low on the northern horizon glitters Capella, brightest star in Auriga the Charioteer. As with other bright stars, the effects of atmospheric refraction can cause it to twinkle vigorously when near the horizon, appearing to flash in multiple colours. In July 1951, a pilot in northern Michigan chased Capella for half an hour under the impression that it was a UFO. Given that Capella is 42 light years away, it is not surprising he did not catch it.

High in the NNE are the brilliant stars of Orion, with the twins (Castor and Pollux) lower in the NE. Below Orion in the ENE (below Orion and to the right of the twins) is Procyon, brightest star in Orion's smaller hunting dog. At only 11 light years away, Procyon is one of our nearest neighbours. Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky, high in the East in January evenings, is even closer, at a distance of only 9 light years. Both have dim companions called "white dwarfs", which are no larger than planets. The diameter of Procyon's companion is only about 30% larger than the diameter of our Earth, while Procyon's diameter is millions of kilometres! A white dwarf is a star that has used up its nuclear fuel, and is slowly cooling down until it crystallises, which typically takes billions of years. It still glows, but only with stored energy. Procyon's companion, for example, is only 0.06% as bright as the Sun.

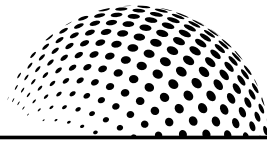
Canopus, the second brightest star in the Earth's night sky, is a bit SE of the zenith (the point overhead). South of the zenith is Achernar at the Southern end of the Celestial River, while Fomalhaut is the brightest star in the SW. In the southern half of the sky in January there is a curious blend of birds and water creatures (including the Southern Fish, the Crane, the Toucan, the Phoenix, the Peacock, the Bird of Paradise, the Flying Fish, the Swordfish and the Water Snake), mixed with mechanical and scientific constellations such as the Octant, the Pendulum Clock, the Chemical Furnace, the Microscope, the Engraving Tool and the Eyepiece Reticle. The Southern Cross and Pointers are very low in the SW even from the Cape and invisible from northern South Africa.

The Morning Sky Stars

Bright stars in the northern half of the sky include Regulus and Procyon in the northwest and orange Arcturus in the northeast. Blue-white Spica is much higher in the northeast. Spica is the brightest of the stars in Virgo, which represents a goddess of ancient mythology. Which goddess is a bit more mysterious. Some thought she was a goddess of the harvest, a notion still evident in the name of Spica, which is Latin for "ear of grain". But others rather associated the constellation with a goddess of justice.

The Cross and the Pointers (the two brightest stars in Centaurus) are high in the south in the predawn January sky, with the three stars of the imaginatively named Southern Triangle directly below the Pointers. The Keel, the Sails, the Poop Deck (constellations seen to the right of the Southern Cross while facing south) were once part of the single giant constellation of Argo Navis, the Argonaut's Ship that sailed to find the Golden Fleece. Just above the Southern Cross and the Housefly are the stars of the great ship Argo as it sails along the Milky Way, accompanied by the dim stars of the Flying Fish. The Milky Way stretches across the morning sky from east to west, a bit south of the zenith, with the bright stars of Scorpius (the Scorpion, commonly known as Scorpio) now rising in the east before dawn. Look out for the brightest star in Scorpius, Antares ('rival of Mars').

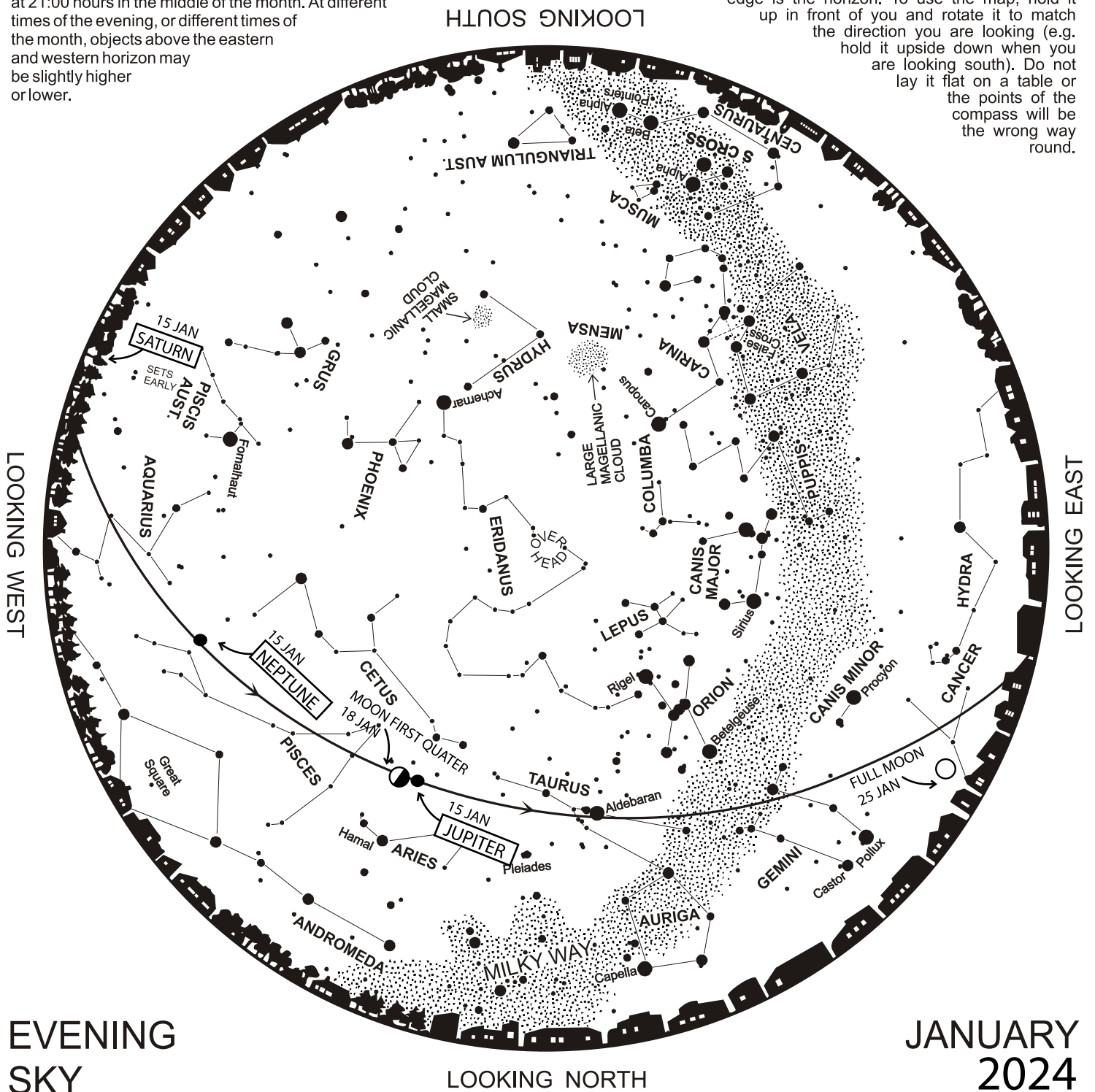
Still very high in the January predawn sky is Hydra the Water Monster, with the Cup mounted on its back and the Crow flying nearby. The brightest star in Hydra is Alphard, high in the NW in the January predawn sky. At a distance of 175 light years away, Alphard is a giant star 40 times the diameter of our Sun. It would stretch halfway to the orbit of Mercury if placed where the Sun is. Since Alphard is also 400 times as bright as the sun, we'd be crispy as a jiffy!



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The map shows the night sky visible above the Cape at 21:00 hours in the middle of the month. At different times of the evening, or different times of the month, objects above the eastern and western horizon may be slightly higher or lower.

The centre of the map is the overhead point, the edge is the horizon. To use the map, hold it up in front of you and rotate it to match the direction you are looking (e.g. hold it upside down when you are looking south). Do not lay it flat on a table or the points of the compass will be the wrong way round.



EVENING SKY

JANUARY 2024

From Auriga (Charioteer) in the north to the Southern Cross low in the south, the Milky Way unfurls itself across our eastern night skies. This month challenge yourself to identify all the stars of Eridanus (river) as it lies directly overhead, starting close to blue supergiant Rigel in Orion (hunter) and ending with bright star Achenar. Two open star clusters, the Pleiades and Hyades, lie towards the north. The latter v-shaped stellar cluster, with bright star Aldeberaan, forms part of Taurus (bull). Further east, look out for the three distinctive belt stars and red supergiant star Betelgeuse in Orion. In African star lore, Aldebaran's hungry wives (Pleiades) sent him to hunt down three zebras (Orion's belt).

Using his bow and single arrow, he foolishly missed but was unable to retrieve it due to a nearby fearsome lion (Betelgeuse). Aldebaran now sits in Taurus, caught between the lion and his angry wives back home. Later this year, make sure to get involved with the 'World Cup' of astronomy events: the 32nd General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union (IAU GA2024) will take place for the first time on African soil in Cape Town from 6 – 15 August 2024. From open-access talks by professional astronomers to night hikes and stargazing parties, there will be plenty of opportunities for the public to get involved (find out more at <https://astronomy2024.org/>).