

March Tonight's Sky

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Constellations

As winter turns into spring, the sky transitions as well with new starry sights to see.

Orion with his shining belt still dominates the evening sky.

Just past Orion's raised arm lies the constellation of Gemini, also known as the Twins.

In Greek mythology, the Twins accompanied Jason and the Argonauts on their expedition in search of the Golden Fleece.

The brightest stars in Gemini mark the heads of the twins, Castor and Pollux.

Pollux is a yellowish giant swelling as it enters old age, and hosts a Jupiter-sized planet.

Castor is a system of three pairs of stars bound in an intricate gravitational dance.

At the feet of the Gemini brothers is a fuzzy patch that binoculars or a small telescope show to be a cluster of several hundred stars called M35.

Neighboring Gemini is the faint constellation of Cancer.

Within the body of Cancer lies M44—the Beehive cluster, one of the nearest star clusters to Earth.

This swarm of stars looks like a cloudy patch to the naked eye, but ground-based telescopes show a pleasing scatter of roughly 1,000 stars.

Adjacent to Cancer lurks the head of Hydra, the water snake, the longest constellation in the sky.

Distant galaxies like NGC 3923 reside along the snake's coils.

While NGC 3923 appears as a faint smudge in backyard telescopes, more powerful observatories reveal it to be a giant, oblong elliptical galaxy with an interesting ripple pattern.

Elliptical galaxies consist of billions of old stars with very little gas to make more.

They can grow larger by ingesting smaller galaxies, forming concentric shells of stars, as seen in this image from NASA's Hubble Space Telescope.

Near the end of Hydra's tail lies M83, a closer galaxy with a spiral shape.

The whorl of M83 blossoms in this Hubble image.

Also known as the Southern Pinwheel, the galaxy is a swirl of dark dust lanes, blue star clusters, and glowing pink star-forming clouds.

An X-ray image reveals details that no human eye could ever see on its own: searing hot gases tracing the spiral arms, black holes and neutron stars emitting X-rays as they gobble up companions, and a core of concentrated black holes and neutron stars—the product of recent star formation.

Enjoy the stars, galaxies, and mythical figures of March from your own backyard.

Celestial wonders await you in tonight's sky.