

Comet PanStarrs: A Welcome Spring Spectacle

Astronomers around the world find and track hundreds of short and long-term comets. Some we may see again in our lifetime, others are not due back for thousands to millions of years. Comets are leftover ice coated dark organic material from the dawn of the solar system around 4.6 billion years ago. It is believed comets brought water and organic compounds, the building blocks of life, to early Earth and other parts of our solar system.

This March, **Comet PanStarrs**, discovered in 2011, has the potential to be a real spectacle as it orbits the sun and burns off ice and dirt. This is the brightest comet in 6 years visible to the planet.

Look for its wispy tail and bright ball head just after sunset in the western sky on March 9, with best views expected on March 12. View from a hilltop with binoculars or telescope.



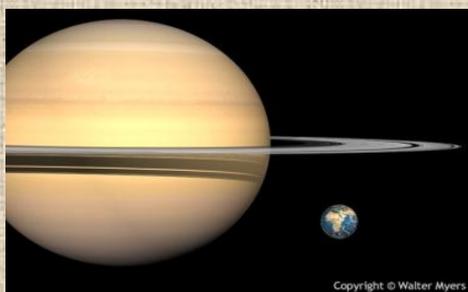
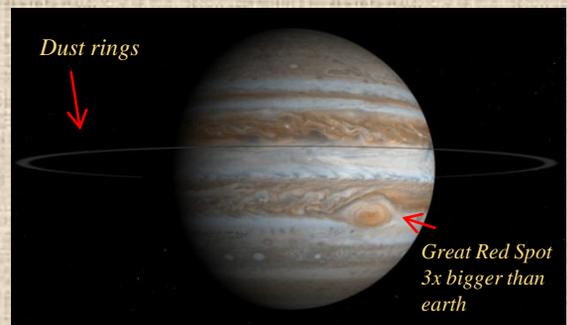
But Wait, There's More

Small near-Earth asteroid 2012 DA14 will pass 17,200 miles from Earth on **February 15**. This is within the ring of communication and weather satellites and is the closest asteroid approach in 40 years. NASA says this 50 meter wide stony asteroid will not collide with Earth. Best views will be on the nightly news or NASA websites.

<http://www.nasa.gov/topics/solarsystem/features/asteroidflyby.html>

The Gas Giants of the Winter Sky

Largest of these 2 magnificent ringed planets is Jupiter—King of the Solar System. Look for Jupiter in the evening sky in the southwest—it is huge, bright and beautiful. While Jupiter has 63 moons, only 4 are visible through telescopes. Io will cross in front of Jupiter and cast a black shadow near the great red spot on **March 2 & 3**. Europa traverses on **March 27** casting its dark shadow on the planets face.



With 62 moons and lots of icy/dirt rings, Saturn is the jewel of the sky. It is 95 times more massive than earth and $\frac{3}{4}$ billion miles away. Its average day is 10.5 hours long, but takes 29.5 years to revolve around the sun. For all of you night owl art cat who want to see Saturn, go out after midnight to see this stunning beauty rise in the southeast until dawn's first light. Good binoculars or a 8"-12" scope will help you see the rings and bands.