

OUTDOORS

“The mountains are calling and I must go.”
—John Muir

CELESTIAL MARIPOSA

What is really in a name?

By MANNY LEINZ

“What’s in a name?” Many of us tend to use the phrase, but — like me — haven’t stopped to consider the origin and context.

As it happens, the words come from William Shakespeare, specifically from the play *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet utters the line as she laments that Romeo’s name, Montague, is the only barrier between them. Her next line is equally famous: “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

So in this month’s article we’ll discover just what is in a name by exploring the origin and meaning of the monikers we assign to the luminaries of the night sky: stars, constellations, planets and more.

Ancient beginnings
People have been gazing at the night sky since long before the advent of written language. The first civilization to imagine, identify and document the group-

ings of stars that we now know as constellations, were the ancient Mesopotamians, over 5,000 years ago.

The Babylonians refined these star patterns into about 18 constellations along the “Path of the Moon,” then later reduced them to the 12 that are represented in the modern Zodiac: Capricornus, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpius and Sagittarius.

Each of these constellations occupied exactly 30 degree segments of the ecliptic (the Sun’s path during the year) and so the Sun spent roughly 30 days in each. These names were later adopted by the Greeks and Romans and spread through western astronomy — and astrology — down to the present day.

Although the construct of these equal 30 degree constellations, or “signs,” remains in use in the pseudo-science of astrology, the border, as officially published by the International Astronomical Union in 1930, are not nearly so equally defined.

As a result, the time the Sun spends in each constellation is highly variable, from a mere seven to eight days in Scorpius, to approximately 45 days in Virgo. Furthermore, the Sun actually visits a 13th constellation during the year: Ophiuchus, the serpent bearer, where it resides for about 18 days!

In total there are 88 constellations defined by the IAU encompassing the entire celestial sphere. They interlock like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, ensuring that there are no overlaps or gaps between constellations.

The names of the constellations come from various sources; those of the northern hemisphere dating from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. Andromeda, Perseus and Hercules, for example, are characters in the Greek myths.



Manny Leinz



The Double Cluster in Perseus.

Manny Leinz photo Sept. 15, 2018 from Bootjack

The southern sky features more recent names, which are often associated with scientific instruments: for example Telescopium (the telescope), Microscopium (the microscope), Horologium (the pendulum clock) and Antlia (the air pump!).

Another crop of southern sky constellations are named for animals, real or imagined: Apus (The Bird of Paradise), Grus (The Crane), Tucana (The Toucan), Lupus (The Wolf), and Centaurus (The Centaur).

Star names and the Winter Hexagon
The Greeks and Romans contributed some early star names, such as Sirius — Greek for “scorching,” appropriately, as it is the brightest star in the sky. Procyon is Greek for “before the dog,” Castor and Pollux are twins from Greek mythology and Capella is Latin for “little she-goat.” However, a large number of the star names we still use today — 47 of the brightest 66 stars — have an Arabic origin.

If you read my article in the Aug. 28, 2025 edition of the *Gazette*, you will remember that the Summer Triangle was overhead. The triangle is formed by the Arabic-named bright stars Vega (“the swooping eagle”), Deneb (“the tail”) and Altair (“the flying one”).

This month the Summer Triangle gives way to the Winter Hexagon: go out after dark on any given night, look high overhead and you will be greeted by six bright stars: Sirius, Procyon, Castor, Capella, Aldebaran and Rigel.

The latter two come from the Arabic: “the follower” and “the foot of the giant,” respectively. The hexagon stands due south at 10 p.m. early in February, then drifts slowly west as the month progresses, setting earlier and earlier as winter gives way to spring.

What else is up this month ...

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention a famous asterism — a prominent pattern of stars smaller than a constellation — which is high in the sky this month: the Pleiades. Named for the seven sisters, daughters of Atlas and the sea-nymph Pleione in Greek mythology; catch them high in the west in the constellation Taurus early in the month as soon as it is dark.

Appearing as a tight dipper-shaped grouping, you can easily spot the brightest members with the naked eye. As you admire many more stars using binoculars, consider that this so-called “open cluster” actually has over 1,000 members!

Another wonderful open cluster visible this month — a pair in fact — is the Double Cluster in the constellation Perseus. Visible to the naked eye as a small fuzzy patch in the northwest early in the month as soon as darkness falls, it is a delight — like diamonds on black velvet — in binoculars.

The King of Planets, Jupiter, remains a prime target for viewing all month. It’s visible all night in the constellation Gemini; rising in the afternoon and setting in the wee hours of the morning by month’s end. Use binoculars or a small telescope to spot Jupiter’s four largest Moons.

You can still spot Saturn — barely — low in the west as soon as it gets dark. It sinks lower as the month progresses and is lost in the horizon by month’s end.

Finally, don’t miss the opportunity to see four planets plus the Moon on the night of Feb. 18th! Go out about 6 p.m. (18 minutes after sunset), and find a place with a good view low to the west. Use binoculars and look very low to the west to see Venus before it sinks below the horizon.

Wait around until the sky darkens, about 6:30 p.m., and look very low to the west again to see the one-day-old Moon with Mercury less than half a degree below. You’ll need binoculars to see the barest sliver of the lunar crescent.

Then look 10 degrees above and to the left of the pair to see the planet Saturn. Finally, look high up to the east to see Jupiter blazing brightly.

I hope you enjoyed this article and that it may inspire you to get out explore the wonders of the night sky. If you would like to get a chart to help you find planets, stars and other celestial sights checkout <https://skyandtelescope.org/interactive-sky-chart/> or <https://theskylive.com/> for starters.

There are also some great free smartphone apps, including Stellarium, SkySafari and SkyView. As always, if you have questions, comments or suggestions for future articles, you can get in touch with me by email at: celestialdeep55@gmail.com. You can find my prior *Gazette* articles on my website at <https://celestialdeep.space/mariposa-gazette/>. If you have a question of general interest, I’ll try to answer it in my next article.

Manny Leinz is a long-time amateur astronomer and night sky photographer. He and his wife live part time in Bootjack where they also have an observatory.

Celestial Highlights for February, 2026

Feb 1		The Full Moon rises in the constellation <i>Cancer</i> at 5:25 PM on February 1 st . It soon transitions into the constellation <i>Leo</i> , reaches its highest point in the sky (transit) at 12:38 AM on the 2 nd , finally setting at 7:40 AM.
Feb 9		The Last Quarter Moon rises in the Constellation <i>Virgo</i> at 12:55 AM on February 9 th , transits at 5:51 AM and sets at 10:41 AM.
Feb 17		Our Milky Way Galaxy is easiest to see around this date of the New Moon. It will be fully dark by 7:09 PM. Bright Jupiter will be visible high in the south east after sunset will be visible until well after midnight in the constellation <i>Gemini</i> . Catch Saturn very low in the west in the early evening in the constellation <i>Pisces</i> .
Feb 18		Don’t miss this chance to see four planets plus the Moon this evening! Look very low to the west to see Venus, later, look very low to the west to see the one day old Moon with Mercury less than half a degree below. Ten degrees above and to the left lies Saturn, while Jupiter blazes high to the east. (see text for more info)
Feb 24		The First Quarter Moon rises in the constellation <i>Pisces</i> at 10:38 AM on February 24 th , transits at 6:28 PM and sets at 1:14 AM on the 25 th . Jupiter trails the Moon high in the south-southeast at sunset and will be visible most of the night in the constellation <i>Gemini</i> .

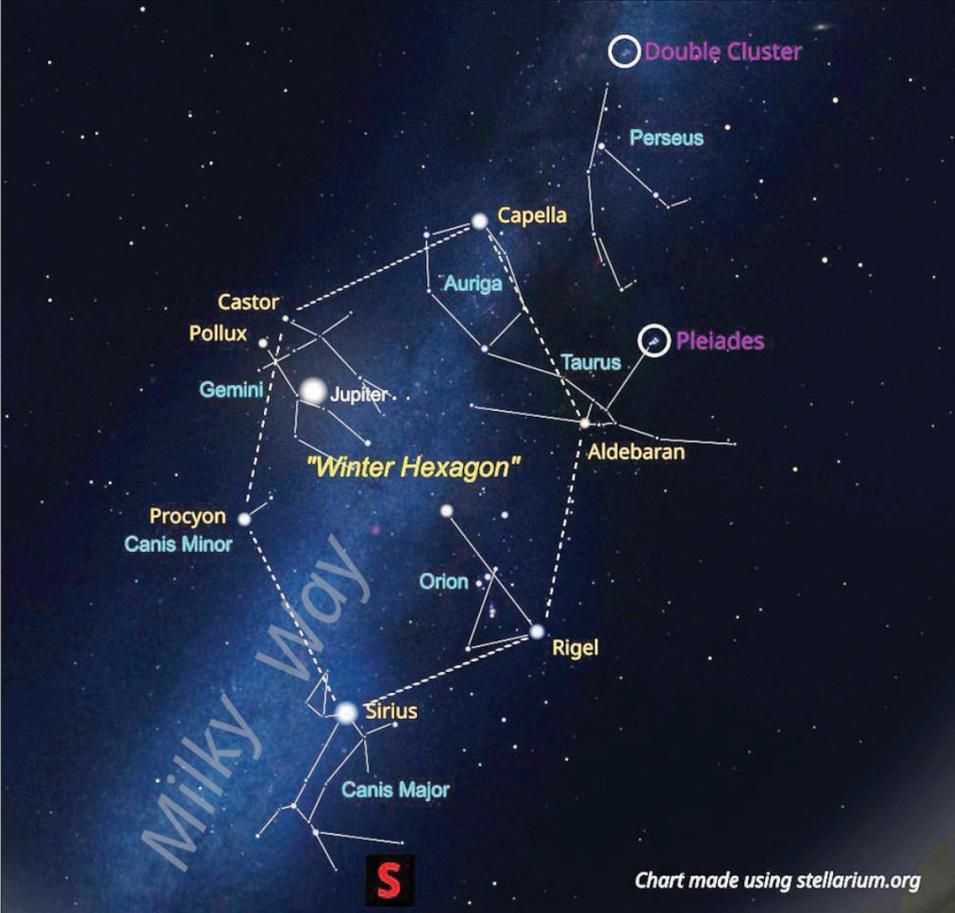


Chart made using stellarium.org

The night sky looking south at 9 p.m. on Feb. 6 showing some of this month’s highlights.



Don’t miss the chance to see four planets and the day old Moon just after sunset on Feb. 18.