

We are now well into spring and the Sun is climbing further up the sky to the summer solstice in June. We are close to that unfortunate time of year for astronomers when the Sun sets late and twilight lingers.

At the beginning of the month the Sun rises at 5.30 a.m. B.S.T. and sets at 8.20 p.m. when it will be 15.5° above the celestial equator. At the end of the month it will rise a little before 5 a.m. and will set around 9 p.m. when it will be around 22° above the celestial equator.

The Moon will be new on May 4th, will be at first quarter on May 12th, will be full on May 18th and will reach last quarter on May 26th.

This May is not a good month for planetary observations. Planets are either too close to the Sun or are on that part of the ecliptic that is low in the sky during the hours of darkness. Early in the month Mars can be glimpsed low in the west north west. It will have disappeared into the sunset before the end of the month. Jupiter is low in the sky in the constellation of Ophiuchus. It will reach an altitude of 10° by 1 a.m. B.S.T. during mid-May. Saturn is in the constellation of Sagittarius and will reach an altitude of 10° in the south east by 2.30 a.m. B.S.T. mid-month.

The sky this month is in transition. Orion and his retinue are just visible at the beginning of the month setting in the west just after sunset. These constellations are generally referred to as the winter constellations and the more westerly ones, especially Taurus with the star clusters of the Hyades and Pleiades are seen as the heralds of winter when they first appear in the eastern sky in autumn. Rising in the east this month are the stars associated with summer. The asterism known as the summer triangle will have risen by late evening. The triangle is composed of three stars; Vega in the constellation of Lyra the lyre, Altair in the constellation Aquila the eagle and Deneb which marks the tail of Cygnus the swan.

Altair is 16 light years away shining with a magnitude of +0.77. Its luminosity is 10 times that of our Sun. In mythology Altair is supposed to represent the eagle sent from Mount Olympus to fetch the shepherd boy Ganymede who came to be the cup bearer to the gods.

Vega is 25 light years from us and shines with a magnitude of +0.03. Its luminosity is 52 times that of our Sun. The constellation Lyra is supposed to represent the lyre or harp given to the musician Orpheus. Vega is sometimes known as the harp star and sometimes as the little tortoise because harps were once fashioned from tortoise shells.

The earth rotates about its axis and because the earth bulges at the equator the axis of rotation has a slow wobble. The point immediately above the north pole traces a circle in the sky taking 26,000 years to complete the circuit. At the moment the pole star is nearly overhead but this will slowly change. In prehistoric time Vega was the pole star and sometime in the far future it will be so again.

Deneb to the naked eye looks similar to Vega and Altair, shining at a magnitude of +1.25, but looks can be deceptive. Deneb is estimated to be in the order of 1,400 light years away, being in the order of 70,000 times as bright as our Sun.

The constellation Cygnus, to which Deneb belongs, has an interesting story concerning Zeus the king of the gods. Zeus according to the legend, became attracted to Leda the wife of King Tyndaerus. In order to conceal his identity Zeus changed himself into a swan and, to cut a long story short, the relationship between Leda and the swan was such that Leda laid an egg. Instead of having it for breakfast Leda hatched it giving birth to Castor and Pollux the Twins. But matters did not end there. It was found that although Zeus was the true father of Pollux, Castor came from another relationship which explains why Pollux was immortal and Castor was not. It also explains the origin of astronomy rhyming slang "That's a load of Castor and Pollux"!

I think that perhaps is enough for this month. See you again in June when we will reach the summer solstice.