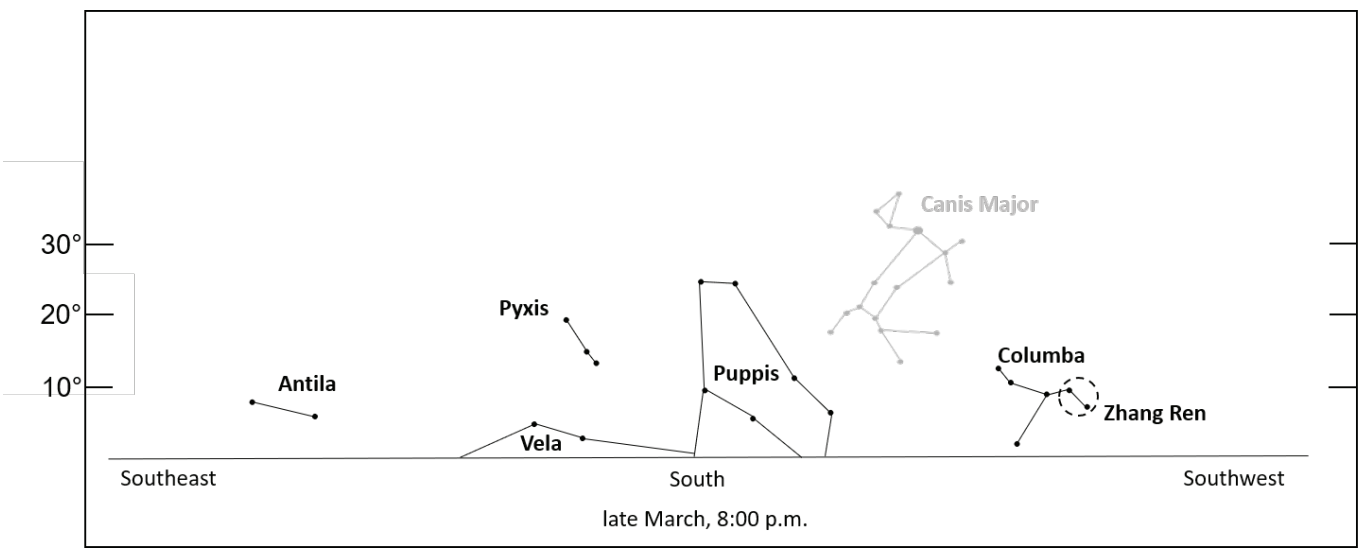
WHAT'S UP?

Hello. Spring is (almost) here. We've shifted our clocks an hour ahead. While that's not great for enjoying our dark skies, at least when it is finally dark enough to observe, it's a bit warmer and – it's still cool enough that we don't have mosquitoes to bother us. Did anyone turn a telescope towards Mare Orientale last month? I used binoculars and could at least tell that there was a dark patch right there at the edge of the Moon. At the March Full Moon (tonight, the 18th) the libration point has moved about 25 degrees to the south of where it was in February and Mare O`rientale is barely visible.

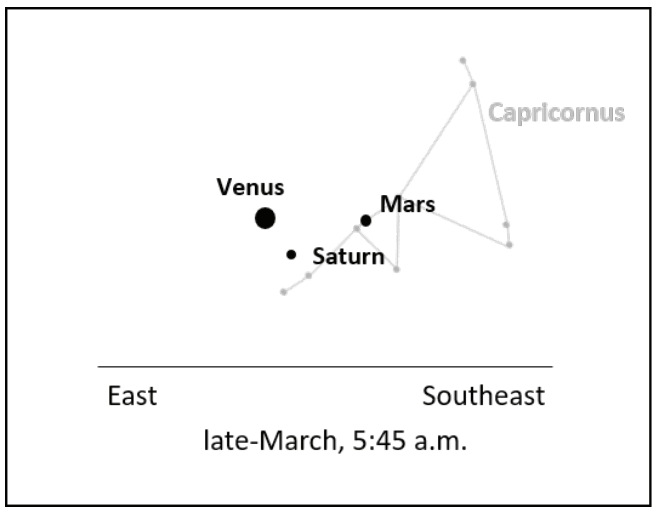
Continuing to flesh-out our tour of the constellations we can see from the Plympton-Halifax-Kingston area, we'll add five more that cling to our southern horizon. Three of these, *Columba*, *Pyxis*, and *Antila,* are completely above the horizon while the others, *Puppis* and *Vela*, are just partially visible. Starting from the west-southwest, we can find *Columba, the Dove*. A modern constellation (16th century), Columba represents Noah's dove, sent to seek dry land. Columba's brightest star, *Phact*, and the star to its southwest are known in Chinese as *Zhang Ren* (*Grandfather*). Moving west, we come to *Puppis* and the northern-most part of *Vela*. These two constellations, combined with a third, *Carina* (which we can't see from our latitude) were at one time all part of *Argo Navis*, the ship of the Argonauts.



Argo Navis was divided by the French astronomer Nicolas-Louis de Lacaille into the three constellations we have today – *Carina (the keel), Vela (the sails),* and *Puppis (the poop or stern)*. A lot of the southern-most constellations in the sky have a nautical connection because they were named by the European sailors that began to explore the southern hemisphere in the 15th and 16th centuries. Continuing across our southern horizon towards the east, we can see *Pyxis, the Compass* and *Antila, the Air Pump*. Both named by Lacaille, *Pyxis* continues the nautical theme while *Antila* represents the science of the times – in this case, a pump used in experiments on vacuums. While none of these five constellations stand out in our sky to be easily traceable, I'm pointing them out to you so that you can see that our *entire* night sky is mapped.

Planet Roundup:

All of the planets except Uranus (and Earth, of course) are found to the west of the Sun and therefore are seen now in our pre-dawn sky. Starting around 5:30 a.m., Venus is bright in the east-southeast and to the north (left) of much-dimmer Mars. Together with Saturn, the three planets form a tight triangle in the sky. The longest side of the triangle (the Venus-to-Mars side) spans just 5 degrees. All three are within the boundaries of the constellation *Capricornus.* Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury follow as dawn breaks but because of the brightening sky, are harder to find (for now!). On the mornings of the 28th through the 30th, this set of planets will be joined by a crescent Moon. The upcoming Moon phases are: Full Moon on March 18th, 3Q on March 25th, New Moon on April 1st (no foolin'), 1Q on March 9th, and coming back around again to Full on April 16th. And let's not forget that Spring starts at 11:33 a.m. on March 20th.



As always, you can reach me at astroblog@comcast.net with any questions and comments. This is What's Up? installment #58.

Barry

Laker Sports is taking a break as the Spring teams settle into their schedules.

Steve Gilbert and his magic lens will be back soon.