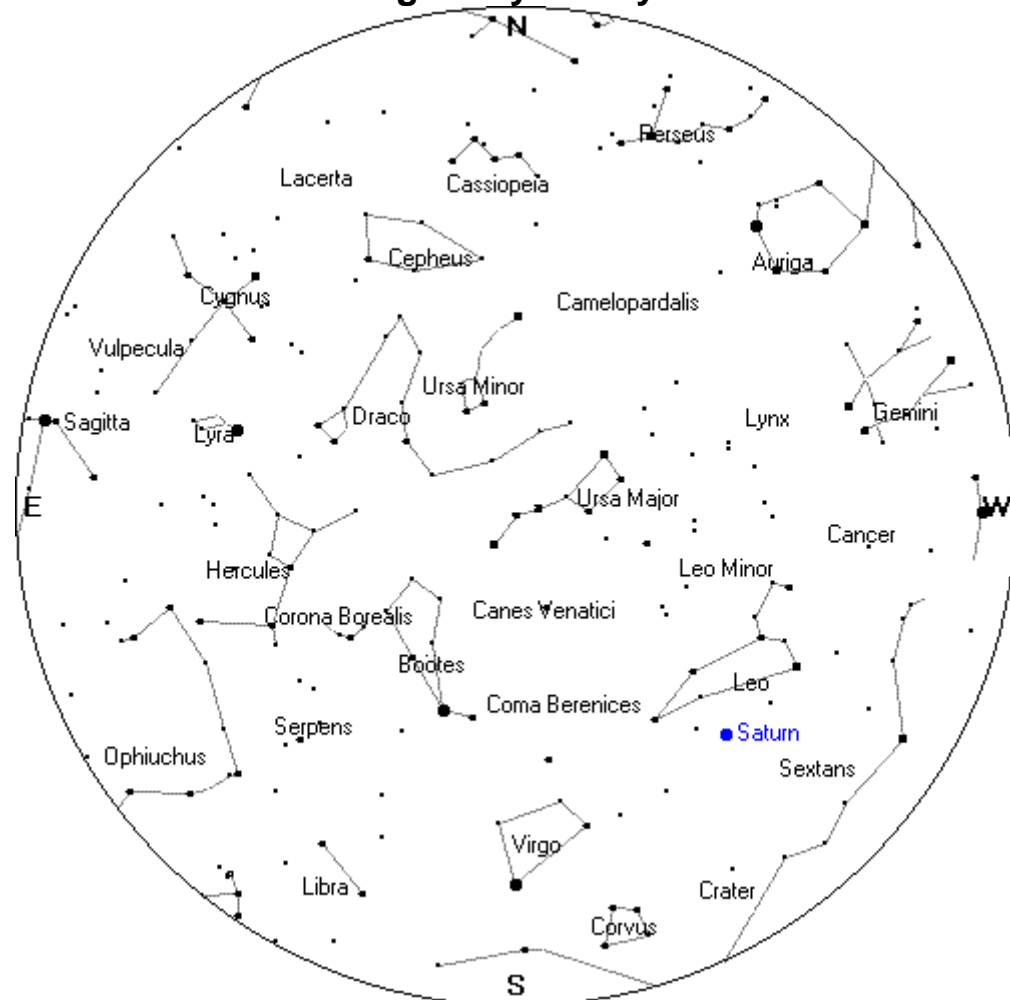


Dundee Astronomical Society The Night Sky in May 2009



The Sky at 10pm on 15th May 2009

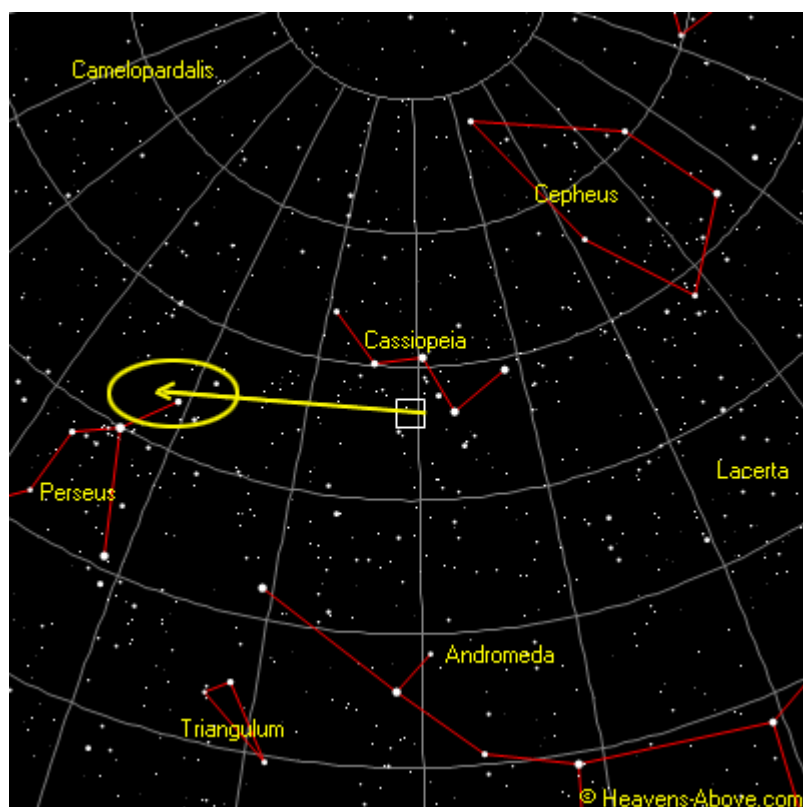
[chart courtesy of www.heavens-above.com]

From the 5th of May until the 8th of August, astronomical twilight lasts for the entire night at our northern latitude. This means that, for astronomers, the sky never really becomes completely dark and limits the observation of faint objects. The brighter stars can, however, still be seen and the constellation taking its place in the southern sky during May is Virgo with its brightest star Spica shining in an area of sky where there are few bright stars. Hipparchus (190 – 120BC) was the first astronomer to note the precession of the equinoxes using measurements made of the position of Spica. Spica is about 260 light years distant and is 2,300 times more luminous than our Sun. Despite the lack of bright stars, Virgo is the second largest constellation in the sky. Virgo is associated with many myths, among which she is seen as the goddess of the Earth, harvest and justice, the latter probably being due to Virgo's proximity to Libra, the scales. Near the northern border of Virgo with Coma Berenices is an area which contains many galaxies. These galaxies are part of the Virgo-Coma supercluster and are at a distance of 65 million light years. Our own Milky Way galaxy and our local companions are also members of this supercluster.

Late May is the time of year when Noctilucent Clouds (NLC) may make their first appearance. These delicate pearly white or blue clouds are seen only when the Sun has dropped at least six degrees below the horizon. The latitude of Dundee makes it an almost ideal place to observe NLC and they were reported on most nights of June and July in 2008. They will always be seen towards the northern part of the sky and between about 11pm until an hour before sunrise. Although NLC are much more active during June and July, early sightings in May could be of value to those studying climate change. **Once again, I ask members to keep a lookout throughout the month and report any NLC to me. In addition, I will be very grateful for any NEGATIVE sightings on clear nights in May, even if the observation has been a short one. Please send me details with a double date (e.g. an observation between 2330UT and 2355UT on 12th May would be reported as 2009 May 12/13, 2330UT – 2355UT). Remember to subtract one hour to get UT – or if not – tell me that the time is given as BST.**

There are two meteor showers during May, but these will more favourable in southerly latitudes. The η Aquarids have a maximum on May 4th with ZHR of about 40. The Moon is 10 days old and, together with lighter evening skies, observers will be fortunate to see even a few strays entering our visible area. The other shower is the weak α -Scorpiids with a maximum on May 12th of only 5 per hour. I wouldn't be inclined to wait up hoping for a chance to see any of these!

Comet Yi-SWAN (2009 F6) was seen at magnitude 8 in Cassiopeia and in May moves into Perseus. It reaches perihelion on May 7th and on May 8th will be at RA 3h 57m and Dec +50°54'. It should remain visible at magnitude 8 – 9 until the third week in May.



Mercury was well placed for observation in late April and will be visible in early May low in the north west 40 minutes after sunset. From about the 10th of the month it will be too close to the Sun to be visible.

Venus rises about an hour before the Sun in early May and will be unmistakable, but low, in the early morning during late May.

Mars can also be seen in the pre-dawn sky but is still a distant object and will not be very bright.

Jupiter rises at about 2am by late May and, although still low in the sky this year, it will be possible to see the Galilean satellites with a small telescope or good binoculars.

Saturn can be seen in the south west, setting at about 3am by late May. The rings have opened slightly and should be seen with a moderate telescope.

The Moon is at first quarter on the 1st, full on the 9th, last quarter on the 17th, new on the 24th and, once again, first quarter on the 31st.

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