

The Street Astronomer's Guide to the Visible Planets for Winter 2011/2012

The Sun

The sun is 865,000 miles in diameter. On a scale of one yard equals one million miles, the sun is 31 inches across (about the size of a beach ball).

Zodiacal Light

The Zodiacal Light is not visible until February. The best times to observe the Zodiacal Light in the west after dark are:

February 8 to February 22

March 8 to March 22

Mercury

Mercury is visible in the evening for the first half of March. Look for it below the brilliant Venus and Jupiter on the evening of March 5th.

(At our scale, Mercury is 36 yards away from the sun and 1/10 inches in diameter)

Venus

The Evening Star is visible until June. Venus continues to grow more brilliant every evening this winter. Be sure to look at Venus and Jupiter very close together in the evening sky on March 12th and 13th. On the evening of March 26th, the thin crescent moon appears close to Venus. In color, Venus is a brilliant white.

(At our scale, Venus is 67 yards away from sun and ¼ of an inch in diameter)

Earth

Winter (the winter solstice) begins on December 22, 2011 at 6:21 PM (CST). Earth reaches perihelion (closest distance from the sun) on January 4th, 2011. On March 20th at 12:14 AM (CST), spring begins (Vernal Equinox).

(At our scale, Earth is 93 yards from the sun and ¼ of an inch in diameter)

Mars

The Red Planet is approaching the earth this winter. It's closest to earth occurs on March 3rd (called opposition). At opposition, Mars rises at sunset and sets at sunrise. Look for Mars as the moderately bright pale yellowish-orange star in the east after it gets dark.

When visible, Mars remains a tiny dot of a star and never grows to as large as the moon (unlike some Internet rumors you can hear).

(At our scale, Mars is 140 yards away from sun and 1/8 inches in diameter)

Jupiter

The King of the Planets is an evening planet, high in the south after dark. Jupiter will be visible all winter long, but approaching the western horizon. Jupiter is the second brightest planet and appears near Venus in March. The planet is a bright pale yellow in color. Binoculars (if held steady) will show the retinue of its four largest satellites. (At our scale, Jupiter is 0.27 miles away from the sun and 2.75 inches in diameter)

Saturn

The solar system's ringed jewel is a morning object in the east this winter and continues to rise earlier every day. Saturn begins rising before midnight in February. Not until spring is Saturn visible in the early evening. Saturn is golden yellow in color. It's brighter than most stars, but only a fraction as bright as Jupiter. (At our scale, Saturn 0.5 miles away from the sun and 2.3 inches in diameter)