

EARTH'S ENCOUNTER WITH MARS CLOSEST IN 50,000 YEARS

Earth's encounter with Mars closest in 50,000 years

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Mars — The Red Planet, the god of war according to the Romans, the source of the name for the month of March, and our very close neighbor in space.

Mars — the stuff of legends and fables. From the infamous 1938 radio broadcast "War of the Worlds" and Ray Bradbury's "Martian Chronicles," all the way to headlines of possible life on Mars and the arrival of the latest spacecraft and rovers, Mars has always held a special place in our hearts and imaginations.

In August 2003, Mars will be very close to the Earth, closer than it has been in the last 50,000 years. So close in fact that it will be brighter and larger than any of us have ever seen it. The Earth and Mars travel in ellipses as they orbit the Sun. Although the Earth's orbit is almost a circle, Mars' is not. Every two years the Earth and Mars pass each other, on the same side of the Sun. Once in a great while this happens during the part of the two orbits that are closest together. 2003 is one of those times.

At the beginning of the month of August, Mars will rise in the East into the evening sky at 10 p.m. By the end of August, as it approaches opposition (when it is directly opposite from the Sun) it will rise at 8 p.m. It will be directly overhead at 1:20 a.m. on Sept. 1. At this time, Mars will be just two days past the point where it is closest to the Sun in its

orbit (perihelion). This means that Mars will appear larger because it is closer to the Earth, and also brighter because not only is it closer to the Earth, but it is also closer to the Sun.

Those of us looking without any equipment will see a bright orange-red dot rising in the East shortly after dark, and setting in the West in the morning.

Those of us with binoculars will see an even brighter Mars. It will look like a planet rather than a star, quite small and orange-red, a disk but with no detail. If you have access to a telescope, this will truly be an event of a lifetime.

You will still not see the level of detail that very large research telescopes can see, and the planet will still be a rather small disk, but this is your chance to see more detail than any other time in your life. You should be able to see light and dark marking on the surface of the planet, which will move across its face during the night as Mars rotates on its axis. The Southern polar icecap should be visible, and for those with larger telescopes, stable air, and lots of patience, you may even be able to glimpse Mars' two moons: Deimos and Phobos.

So, in August, be sure to get outside, find a dark place, and check out one of our closest celestial neighbors — Mars. For more information about astronomy go to the North Houston Astronomy Club's Web site: www.astronomyclub.org or come to one of our meetings at Kingwood College on the fourth Friday of the month at 7:30 p.m.



Mars in the August night sky. Photo courtesy of Dick Locke

CONTRIBUTE - VERB - To give something, especially money, in order to provide or achieve something together with other people. – *prispevati*

FABLE - NOUN - A short story which tells a general truth or is only partly based on fact, or literature of this type. - *basen, bajka; izmišljena zgodba*

HEADLINE - NOUN - A line of words printed in large letters as the title of a story in a newspaper, or the main points of the news that are broadcast on television or radio. - *naslovna vrsta v časopisu*

ROVERS - ???

HELD - TRANSITIVE VERB - Past simple and past participle of hold. - *držati, obdržati*

ALTHOUGH - CONJUNCTION - Despite the fact. - *čeprav, četudi*

DURING - PREPOSITION - From the beginning to the end of a particular period. - *med, za časa*

OPPOSITION - NOUN - Strong disagreement. - *odpor, nasprotje*

OVERHEAD - ADJECTIVE ADVERB - Above your head, usually in the sky - *nadzemeljski, zgornji, oz zgoraj, nad glavo*

DOT - NOUN - A very small round mark – spot. – *pika*

AXIS - NOUN - A real or imaginary straight line which goes through the centre of a spinning object. - *(navidezna) os*

ICECAP - NOUN - A thick layer of ice that permanently covers an area of land. - *ledenik; ledena odeja*

GLIMPSE - VERB - To see something or someone for a very short time or only partly. - *bežno zagledati*

CELESTIAL - ADJECTIVE - Formal of or from the sky or outside this world. - *nebesno telo, nebesnina*