

HEAVENLY NEWS & VIEWS



Telescopic view of Mars

“MARS – THE RED PLANET”

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Mars is extremely favorable for telescopic observing this month. From now until April 2008, Mars will be great to view all night long. Mars is the only planet with a surface that can be easily seen through amateur telescopes. Despite its small size, which is about half the size of Earth, Mars has higher mountains, larger rift valleys, and larger impact basins than Earth.

Very good telescopic views of can be expected in the coming weeks as the Red Planet nears opposition on December 24th, 2007. Opposition means opposite the Sun in planet Earth's sky – an arrangement that occurs every 26 months for Mars. Because of Mars' more elliptical orbit, the actual date of closest approach to Earth will be December 18th when Mars will be within about 56 million miles from Earth. Situated in the constellation Gemini and rising after evening twilight, the bright, ruddy disk of Mars will reach nearly 16 arc seconds in diameter (about 1/100th the apparent diameter of the Full Moon).

What will Mars look like in your telescope? It depends. You may be able to see hints of the white polar caps and different color markings on the planet clearly, depending on such variables as the quality and cleanliness of your telescope optics and magnification strength and quality of your eyepieces. Weather and atmospheric conditions, both on Earth and Mars impact your view too. If you are observing Mars at low power through a small 60mm - 100mm aperture telescope, Mars will look like a small orange disk or sphere with few markings. Larger telescopes will reveal more details on the planet and occasional haze on the limbs or edges of the sphere.

You can also observe Mars through one of the two 14” reflector telescopes at the Cameron Park Rotary Club - Community Observatory. For more information about the observatory go to www.communityobservatory.com for current hours of operations and driving directions.