

# APRIL 2026

10:30 pm on April 1  
 9:30 pm on April 15  
 8:30 pm on May 1

**To use this chart:** hold the chart in front of you and turn it so the direction you are facing is at the bottom of the chart.

- **Bright Stars**
- **Medium Bright Stars**
- **Faint Stars**

**Scan dark skies with binoculars:**

- M-42: The Great Orion Nebula
- M-44: The Beehive Cluster
- M-45: The Pleiades star cluster
- The Double Cluster in Perseus

Spring is here! The days have been getting longer ever since the first day of winter, and will continue to lengthen until the first day of summer, June 20.

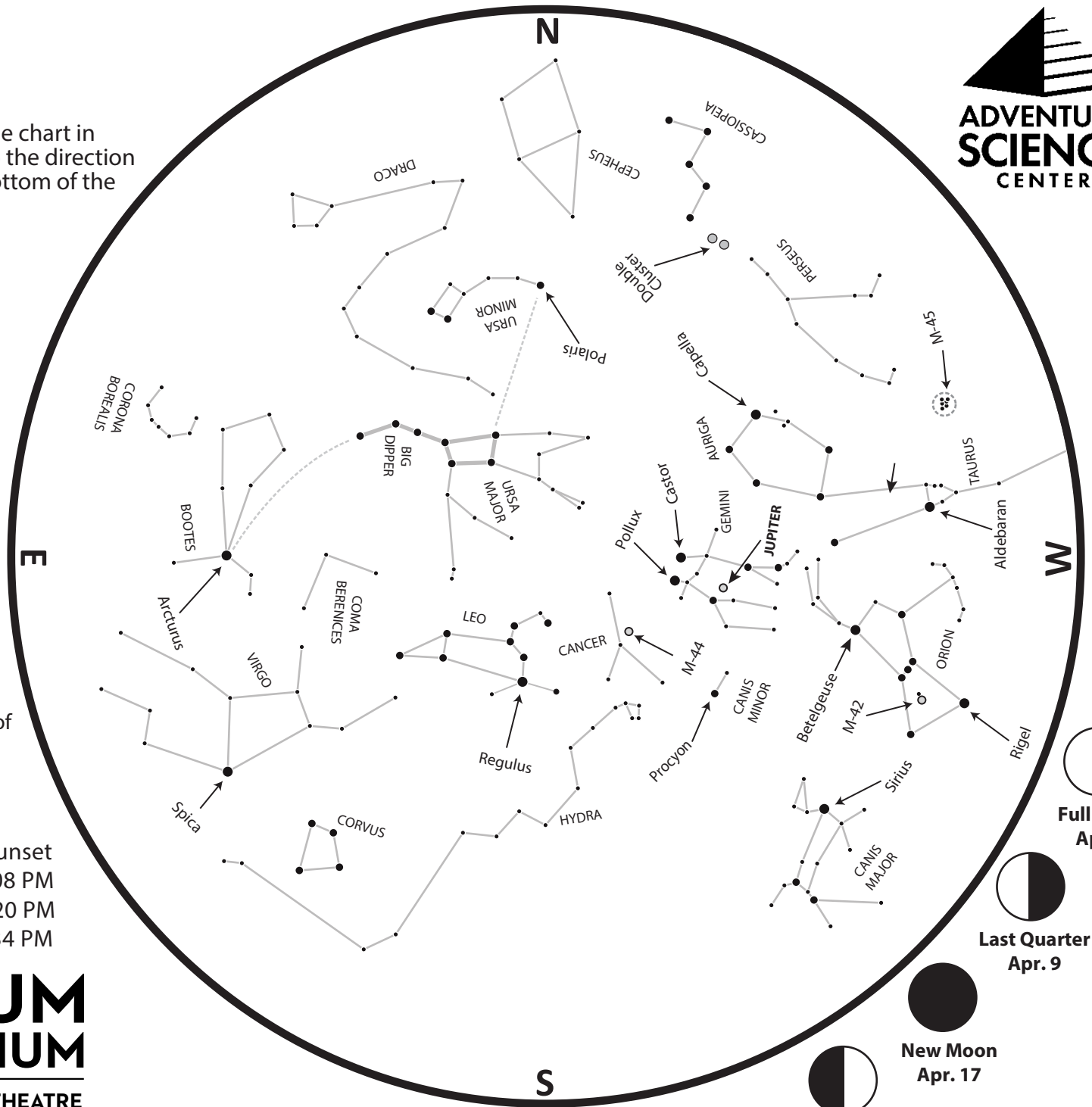
From Nashville:

	Sunrise	Sunset
Apr. 1	6:34 AM	7:08 PM
Apr. 15	6:14 AM	7:20 PM
May 1	5:55 AM	7:34 PM

## SUDEKUM PLANETARIUM

JUDITH PAYNE TURNER THEATRE

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## After Sunset

The first bright point of light you're likely to spot after sunset is brilliant **Jupiter**, high in the west. It appears almost directly overhead as sky begins to darken at the beginning of the month. It will gradually appear lower in the sky as the weeks go on.

Look at Jupiter with a telescope to see the massive planet's cloud bands and up to four of its moons. Try sketching the position of Jupiter's moons. Then, come back a night or two later to see that they've moved! If you observe very carefully you might even catch the faster orbiting moons moving over the course of a few hours.

Look low to the west as the sky darkens for **Venus**. Venus is brighter than Jupiter but the glow of sunset may make it harder to spot until late in the month. Keep an eye on the relative positions of Venus and Jupiter - they will meet for beautiful pairing in early June.

Watch for the Moon near Venus on April 18 and near Jupiter on April 22.

You can use the stars of the Big Dipper to find **Polaris**, the **North Star**. Use the two stars at the end of the bowl of the Dipper to point you to Polaris. When you face Polaris, you're facing due north.

Polaris is not a particularly bright star, but it does remain fixed in the sky throughout the night and throughout the year. Polaris is at the end of the handle of the **Little Dipper**. This group of stars is officially known as **Ursa Minor the Little Bear**. Similarly, the Big Dipper is just a part of the official constellation **Ursa Major the Great Bear**. You'll need dark skies to see the great bear's fainter stars.

Imagine poking a hole in the bottom of the Dipper to let the water drip out. The water falls onto the back of **Leo the Lion**. The head and mane of the lion are represented by a group of stars that looks something like a backwards question mark. Other stargazers imagine the top hook of a coat hanger, or a sickle in this group of stars. The "dot" at the bottom of the question mark is **Regulus**, the brightest star in Leo. It marks the regal heart of the lion.

Follow the curved handle of the Big Dipper to trace the 'arc' to **Arcturus**, the orange colored star in **Boötes the Herdsman**. Then speed on to **Spica**, the single bright star in **Virgo the Maiden**, low in the southeast. Neither of these constellations has any other bright stars. Even under dark skies away from city lights, it's hard to imagine these mythological figures just by connecting the dots.

Look low to the west for our last glimpses of winter constellations. **Orion the Hunter** stands out early in the month, but will be lost in the glow of sunset by May. Follow Orion's belt to the left to find the brightest star in the night sky, **Sirius**, in

**Canis Major the Big Dog**. Follow the belt stars to the right to find orange star **Aldebaran**, the eye of **Taurus the Bull**.

Keep going past Aldebaran in the same direction to find a beautiful cluster of stars known as the **Pleiades**. To some eyes it looks like a miniature version of the Little Dipper. Under dark skies most people can see six stars, but under excellent dark-sky conditions, people with good eyesight can see seven. With a small telescope or a pair of binoculars, you may see dozens! The Pleiades is an example of an **open star cluster**. Look for it early in the month - by the end of the month it will set early, lost in the glow of sunset.

Draw a line from Orion's blue-colored foot **Rigel** up through red star **Betelgeuse**, and keep on going until you run into **Gemini the Twins**. The bright stars **Castor** and **Pollux** mark the heads of the twins from ancient mythology. Under dark skies you may just be able to pick out two stick-figure bodies leading back towards Orion.

## From Dark Skies

Bright outdoor lighting can make it hard to see all but the brightest stars. Even a bright Moon can make it difficult to see the fainter objects in the sky. On a clear night, find a dark spot far away from city lights, give your eyes time to adjust to the dark, and look for even more celestial sights.

Just beneath the belt of Orion is a faint patch of light that marks the hunter's sword. This is **M-42**, the **Great Orion Nebula**. A small telescope can reveal the overall shape of the nebula, as well as a quartet of young stars near the center called the **Trapezium**. These stars formed out of the gas and dust of the nebula.

Look between the constellations Leo and Gemini to find... nothing? Even under dark skies you'll have to look closely to spot the famous but faint constellation **Cancer the Crab**, shaped like an upside-down letter Y. Near the center of the Y is **M-44**, the **Beehive Cluster**. Like the Pleiades in Taurus, this open star cluster is a great target for binoculars.

## Early Morning

As Earth orbits the Sun throughout the year, the constellations rise and set just a little bit earlier every day. You won't see much difference from night to night, but you will over the course of weeks or months. What we see in today's pre-dawn sky is a preview of the early evening sky in later months. Go out before dawn this month for a look ahead at the summer evening sky.

By morning, our winter constellations have long since set in the west, and even springtime constellation Leo the Lion has set. High in the east are the three bright stars that make up the **Summer Triangle**. To the south is the J-shaped **Scorpius the Scorpion**, with the red star **Antares**.

Before you set your alarm for the wee hours of the morning, consider planning out your observing. Desktop planetarium software like the

free, open-source Stellarium ([stellarium.org](http://stellarium.org)) can show you more precisely where night sky objects can be found on any date and time, and help you plan ahead.

## How to Use a Star Chart

Newcomers to star charts like this one may quickly notice what looks like a serious error: east and west are labelled backwards! But it's no mistake: remember that this is a map of the sky, not of the ground. Flip it up over your head and look at it from below. The cardinal directions are correct!

If you'd rather not observe while holding a piece of paper over your head, that's understandable. Hold the chart in front of you and face south. The bottom area of the chart features stars that are in front of you. The top of the chart are stars that are behind you, and the center of the chart is straight overhead.

Want to look to the west instead? Just rotate the chart in your hands until west is at the bottom.

Our charts are made to show you the early evening night sky. What if you want to get out late at night or in the morning instead? Consider purchasing a **planisphere**, sometimes called a star wheel. Planispheres are a simple and inexpensive kind of star chart that consists of two disks that rotate on a common pivot. Rotate the disks to set the date and time you want to observe, and you'll see the right set of stars. Different planispheres are made for different latitudes of the Earth. In Tennessee, make sure to find one made for approximately 40° north latitude. You can even print out and make a planisphere at home by visiting:

[skyandtelescope.org/astronomy-resources/make-a-star-wheel](http://skyandtelescope.org/astronomy-resources/make-a-star-wheel)

You can also buy more durable planispheres online.

One tiny drawback to planispheres: they can't show you where the planets or the Moon are. These objects constantly move through the constellations over days, months and years.

Desktop planetarium software like the free, open-source Stellarium ([stellarium.org](http://stellarium.org)) can show you more precisely where night sky objects will be on any date and time, from any location on Earth. It's a great way to learn about the night sky before you go out for a look at the real thing!

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Judith Payne Turner Theatre**

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