

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE



With Glenn Dawes

April means basking in our Galaxy's riches and the welcome return of four planets to Southern skies

When to use this chart

1 Apr 00:00 AEDT (31 Mar, 13:00 UT)
15 Apr 23:00 AEST (13:00 UT)
30 Apr 22:00 AEST (12:00 UT)

The chart accurately matches the sky on the dates and times shown for Sydney, Australia. The sky is different at other times as the stars crossing it set four minutes earlier each night.

APRIL HIGHLIGHTS

Four planets that were in conjunction with the Sun and invisible last month now return to the eastern predawn sky. Brilliant Venus is by far the brightest, with Saturn 8° to the right, shining at first magnitude. At a similar brightness is Mercury, 2° below Saturn. Neptune (needing a telescope to view) rises from below Mercury and they pass on 17th, only 0.6° apart. On 25th, a thin crescent Moon has an impressive conjunction with Venus and Saturn, forming an isosceles triangle.

STARS AND CONSTELLATIONS

In April, our magnificent Milky Way is seen edge-on, with its many open star clusters and nebulae residing in the plane of our Galaxy. In contrast, to the north is the realm of distant galaxies. Common to both regions, scattered across the sky are globular star clusters, which are distributed in a sphere centred on our galactic core. You might say stars are common to both too, but most naked-eye examples are solar neighbours, only a couple of hundred lightyears away.

THE PLANETS

Uranus is poorly placed, setting around the end of twilight mid-month. It's followed by another denizen of the outer Solar System, Jupiter, which spends April inside the horns of Taurus, not far from Aldebaran. Get onto Jupiter early,

as it will be setting around 21:00. Mars is a more leisurely target, being near the meridian at sunset and departing around midnight. There's no further planetary action until Venus, Saturn, Mercury and Neptune are visible low in the predawn sky.

DEEP-SKY OBJECTS

This month, a trip to Hydra. Near its border with Centaurus lies the spectacular galaxy M83 or NGC 5236 (RA 13h 37.0m, dec. -29° 52'). Even a 60mm scope shows this seventh-magnitude barred spiral's distinctive bright core with a 5-arcminute long bar, surrounded by a 14-arcsecond halo. Larger scopes show this to be mottled; 200mm will reveal spiral arms curving off the ends of the bar in an anticlockwise direction.

Heading westward, Hydra presents another gem: NGC 3242, aka the Ghost of Jupiter Nebula (RA 10h 24.8m, dec. -18° 39'). This seventh-magnitude pale-blue planetary gets its name from being around the same size as the planet Jupiter, at 30 x 38 arcseconds. Its obvious disc has a fuzzy edge, with an 11th-magnitude central star. If the seeing is good, look for a dark gap surrounding this star.

Chart key

GALAXY	DIFFUSE NEBULOSITY	ASTEROID TRACK	STAR BRIGHTNESS: MAG. 0 & BRIGHTER
OPEN CLUSTER	DOUBLE STAR	METEOR RADIANT	MAG. +1
GLOBULAR CLUSTER	VARIABLE STAR	QUASAR	MAG. +2
PLANETARY NEBULA	COMET TRACK	PLANET	MAG. +3
			MAG. +4 & FAINTER

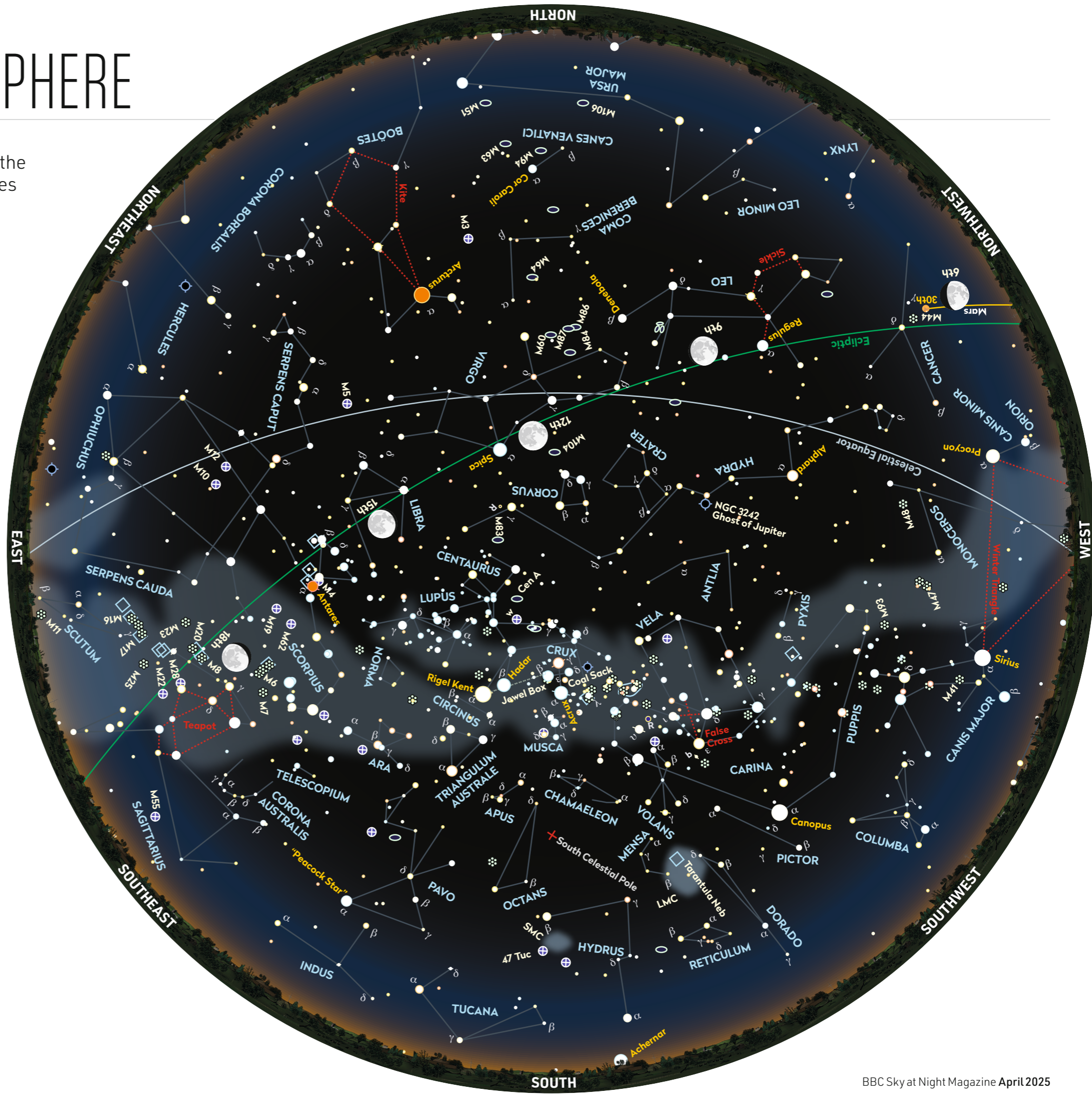


CHART: PETE LAWRENCE