

What's Up May 2018

What's Up for May? The moon and Saturn meet Mars in the morning as NASA's InSight spacecraft launches to the red planet on May 5.

Hello and welcome. I'm Jane Houston Jones from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.

You won't want to miss red Mars in the southern morning skies this month. Some lucky viewers in central and southern California and even parts of the Mexican Pacific coast will get a chance to see the launch of InSight--NASA's latest mission—with their unaided eyes AND see the spacecraft's destination, Mars, at the same time.

InSight is scheduled to reach Mars on November 26, 2018. The launch window from Vandenberg Air Force Base in central California opens on May 5 at 4:05 a.m. Pacific Daylight Time and lasts for two hours. On subsequent dates, the window opens a few minutes earlier each day until 1:30 a.m. Pacific Daylight Time on June 8th.

This will be the first interplanetary launch from the West Coast.

Mars shines a little brighter than last month, as it approaches opposition on July 27th. That's when Mars and the Sun will be on opposite sides of the Earth. This will be Mars' closest approach to Earth since 2003! Compare the planet's increases in brightness with your own eyes between now and July 27th.

The Eta Aquarid meteor shower will be washed out by the Moon this month, but if you are awake for the InSight launch anyway, have a look. This shower is better viewed from the southern hemisphere, but medium rates of 10 to 30 meteors per hour MAY be seen before dawn. Of course, you could travel to the South Pacific to see the shower at its best!

There's no sharp peak to this shower--just several nights with good rates, centered on May 6th. Give yourself an hour to view meteors, as they sometimes come in spurts with lulls in between. Plus, it takes about 20 minutes for your eyes to dark adapt. You don't need to look directly at the radiant. Instead, look away or even lie on the ground looking directly overhead. That gives you a wide amount of sky to watch comfortably.

Jupiter reaches opposition on May 9th, heralding the best Jupiter-observing season, especially for mid-evening viewing. That's because the king of the planets rises at sunset and sets at dawn. Wait a few hours after sunset, when Jupiter is higher in the

sky, for the best views. If you viewed Jupiter last month, expect the view to be even better this month!

You can catch up on solar system missions like InSight, and all of NASA's missions at: www.nasa.gov

That's all for this month. I'm Jane Houston Jones.