

SCOPE On the skies

An ancient princess sacrifices beauty for love. A dishonest crow's thirst will never be quenched.

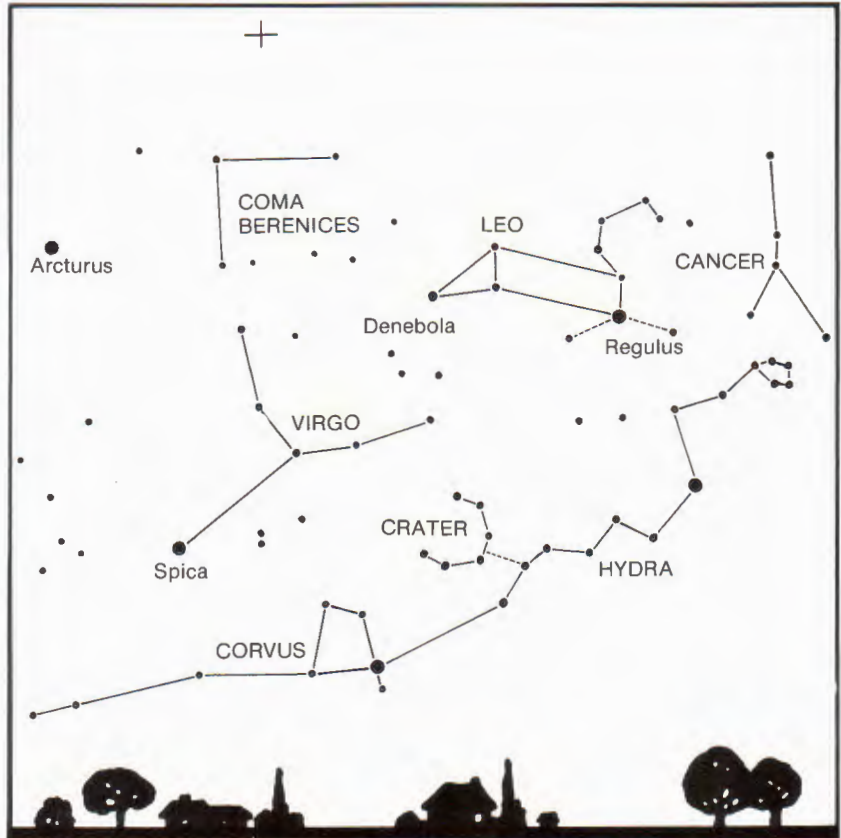


The evening skies of April contain fewer bright stars than most months, but nevertheless are filled with folklore and mythology. Now let's learn about lore of love and devotion and punished dishonesty.

Beauty and love

Just east of majestic Leo the Lion, between the stars Denebola and Arcturus, lie faint stars marking the constellation Coma Berenices. This constellation honors an Egyptian queen's beautiful, long locks of hair.

According to lore, Berenice, a princess, married Ptolemy Sotor III, the king of Egypt in the third century B.C. Ptolemy considered his wife's hair a great treasure that inspired poets and everyone's admiration. During a spell when Ptolemy was away fighting the Assyrians, Berenice became so worried she prayed to Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, for her husband to return safely. Berenice offered to cut off her hair as a gesture of gratitude if Venus answered her prayers. Ptolemy eventually returned from combat, so Berenice followed through with her promise and cut off her hair. This angered Ptolemy until an astronomer soothed him by saying that Jupiter had placed Berenice's hair in the sky for the whole world to enjoy.



LOOKING SOUTH ABOUT 9 P.M.

Within the boundaries of Coma Berenices is the north galactic pole, the point around which our disk-shaped galaxy rotates. This is similar to the rotation of our sky around the north celestial pole, marked by polaris. By looking toward Coma Berenices you can see beyond the Milky Way into extragalactic space.

Punished dishonesty

Two small, inconspicuous constellations, Corvus the Crow and Crater the Cup, hang low over the horizon during April. These two constellations are perched on the back of a long sinuous constellation known as Hydra the Watersnake. According to myth, Apollo sent Corvus, a beautiful, gleaming-white crow with a wonderful singing voice, to fetch some drinking water. As Corvus was on his way to fetch the water from a river he spotted a fig tree with some delicious-looking but unripe fruit hanging from its branches. "I'm so

fond of figs; it would be a pity to let them go to waste," he thought to himself. So, Corvus decided to wait for the figs to ripen. When the figs ripened, he ate his fill. Corvus enjoyed his treat until he realized that he had not yet fetched Apollo's drinking water. He immediately flew to the river, filled the cup, and raced back.

Upon his return, Corvus fabricated a story to explain his delay: A watersnake had nearly prevented him from getting the drinking water. The incredulous Apollo punished Corvus for his dishonesty first by changing his pretty white feathers black, and then by replacing his singing voice with a horrible, screeching caw. Lastly, Apollo put Corvus and the cup on the back of Hydra the Watersnake, and cast the three into the sky.

Apollo instructed Hydra to prevent the crow from drinking from the cup. And now, through the spring, you can see that Corvus still chases the cup across the sky.

Art by Max-Karl Winkler



Unfolding drama

Three planets brighten the evening sky during April and hint at the spectacular celestial display to unfold this summer. Venus, shining very brightly, moves through part of Taurus this month on its way to a rendezvous with Mars and Jupiter. Mars moves from Taurus into Gemini, while Jupiter remains within Cancer. Our moon glides past these three planets between April 17 and 21.

Evening planets

Mercury: Appears very low over the western horizon at sunset—difficult to see.

Venus: Sets 3.5 hours after sunset—very visible.

Mars: Located high over southwestern horizon at sunset.

Jupiter: Is high over southern horizon at sunset.

Moon Phases

Third Quarter - April 7

New Moon - April 14

First Quarter - April 21

Full Moon - April 28

Bob Riddle is the planetarium director for the Kansas City School District at Southwest Magnet Math & Science High School.



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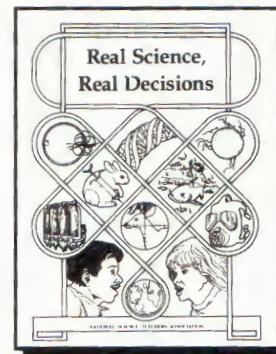


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