

Wiltshire Astronomical Society

WAS News

March 2026



This Month We Welcome.....

Mark Radice

Observing with Binoculars



Mark Radice is an amateur astronomer and photographer based near Salisbury in England (a stone's throw from Stonehenge) with a passion for observing the night sky.

He started actively observing using a borrowed pair of binoculars when comet Hyakutake crossed the sky in [too many years ago now!] and now enjoys using his own equipment from a garden observatory.

Mark has been published several times in Astronomy Now and was shortlisted for the 2021 AstroPhotography of the Year competition.

Astronomical interests include high resolution lunar and planetary imaging, deep sky sketching and binocular observing - all with a cup of tea.

He writes occasionally for Astronomy Now, enjoys visiting dark skies and star parties in the UK and overseas and writes too infrequently on his own blog www.refreshingviews.com.



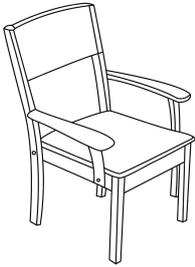
Inside this issue

Comments from the Chair	2
The Future of WAS.....	2
March Planets.....	6
Members Gallery.....	4
Constellation Focus.....	7
Artemis Update.....	9
Comet 3I/Atlas & JUICE.....	10
Observing Sessions Schedule.....	12
Meeting Schedule 25/26.....	13
Contact Us.....	14

Special points of interest

- This months speaker (1)
- The Future of WAS (2)
- Observing Sessions Schedule (11)
- Meeting Schedule (12)

Comments from the Chair



The Future of WAS

Normally this space is reserved for general notes about organisations or astronomical terminology, but this month I want to turn the spotlight onto our own Society and what we can do to secure its future.

Not everyone wants to volunteer, and that's absolutely fine. Many members simply enjoy coming to meetings, listening to our speakers, and spending time with like minded people. But for the Society to function, we do rely on a small group of volunteers to organise speakers, run observing sessions, manage IT, and handle the treasury.

In our entire history we have had just three Chairpersons—one serving 19 years, another 12 years so far, and one for a single year. It's a reminder that we need to think about how we bring more people into officer roles. At present, if any member of the committee were unable to attend, we would struggle to cover their responsibilities. We need back-ups, and we need to share the load more widely.

So this is a genuine appeal to the wider membership: please consider stepping forward.

The refreshments are handled by Chris, who also runs the Society's observing sessions. Sam manages the treasury and is also responsible for setting up the Zoom link at every meeting. As Chair, I compile the Newsletter and arrange our speakers. It's a lot for a handful of people to carry.

With the long term health of the Wiltshire Astronomical Society in mind... we would be grateful for your help.

Thank you.

After several weeks of rather dreary, wet and overcast conditions, we were at last treated to a brief spell of clearer skies. Members' latest astrophotography is, as always, available in the Gallery. One can only hope these clearer intervals become more frequent, although—as I write this—the rain has returned once again.

As much as I admire deep-sky images, I always enjoy lunar photography — and of course the Moon is a much easier target for anyone new to astrophotography. Perhaps we could include a short session on lunar imaging during our AGM in June? If anyone would like to lead it, please do step forward.

You may remember my ongoing attempts to persuade Wiltshire Council to adjust the lighting in the car park next to my home. After involving my ward's Town Councillor, it quickly became clear I was getting nowhere.

Three weeks ago, the Town Council held a drop-in session at the Town Hall where residents could raise issues over a coffee. This was my chance to speak directly with the Mayor. She took detailed notes and promised to follow up promptly — and to her credit, she did.

Her first attempt was rejected by the Parking Services Director, who insisted no changes were needed because the lights had been "checked" and were positioned correctly to illuminate the car park. Frustratingly, these checks were carried out in daylight!

The next step was to involve the Wiltshire County Councillor for the town. He pushed for shades to be fitted to the lights. A week later, the Mayor called with good news: the council had agreed that lighting should not spill into residential properties. They will now carry out a proper inspection after dark and then arrange to reduce the brightness and redirect the lamps so they are no longer a nuisance. Yip-pee! Now I'm just waiting for the work to begin. I'll update everyone once this saga reaches its conclusion.

I suppose the moral of the story is this: if nuisance lighting is affecting your astronomy, keep pushing both

the town and county councils — and don't forget to mention *Section 79 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 on Statutory Nuisance (Lighting)*.

Another disappointing month for observing sessions. Of course this is out of hands completely, we can just hope that coming months provide better opportunities.

The committee are starting to plan for the 12 August 2016, a 89% partial eclipse which will occur shortly before sunset. More details will follow.

Clear Skies!

Simon

A last minute inclusion from Rob.....



This was my second image with the Dwarf 3 from Pewsham. The first was just a test to see if it would go to a target and stack images.

I took the Dwarf to Fuerteventura last week, but problems with sand in the air from the Sahara, couldn't see the horizon during the day. Apparently this is common during January and Feb. Might be able to salvage something with processing.

Anyway, two things learnt, the Dwarf3 is a great scope for taking on flights in hand luggage, and avoid Fuerteventura in January and February!

The March Night Sky

Seasonal Skies: Winter Fades, Spring Arrives

The **March equinox** on **20 March** marks the arrival of astronomical spring. The sky shifts noticeably throughout the month:

- **Orion** dominates early evenings but sinks earlier each night
- **Leo** climbs high in the south, its bright star **Regulus** a key marker
- **Virgo** rises later, bringing **Spica** into view
- The Milky Way becomes less prominent as winter constellations depart

Longer evenings and milder nights make this a comfortable transition month for observers.

Lunar Phases & Close Approaches

March offers several attractive lunar encounters:

- **9 March** — **Last Quarter Moon**
- **18 March** — **New Moon** (excellent for deep sky observing)
- **23 March** — **Moon near the Pleiades (M45)**, a beautiful binocular sight
- **26 March** — **Moon–Jupiter conjunction**, a bright pairing in the evening sky

These close approaches are ideal for beginners and photographers alike.

Planetary Highlights

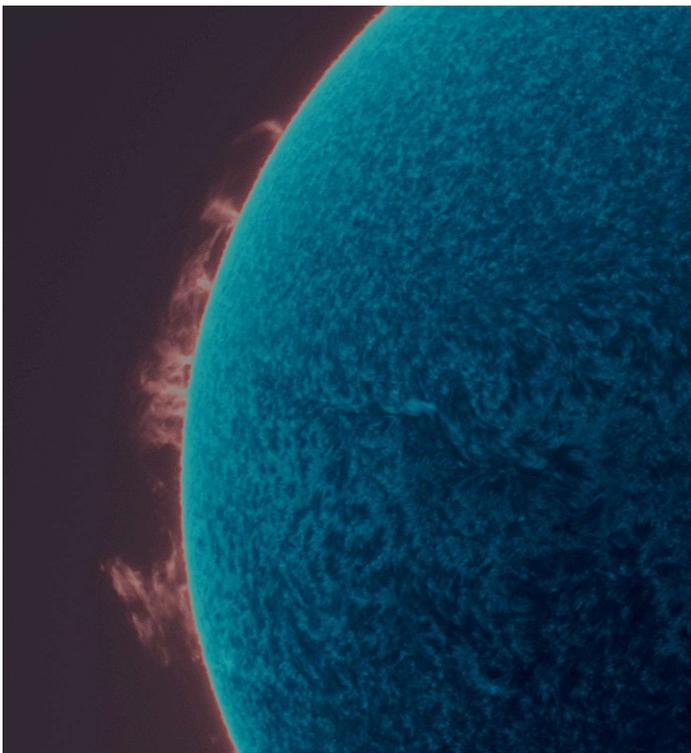
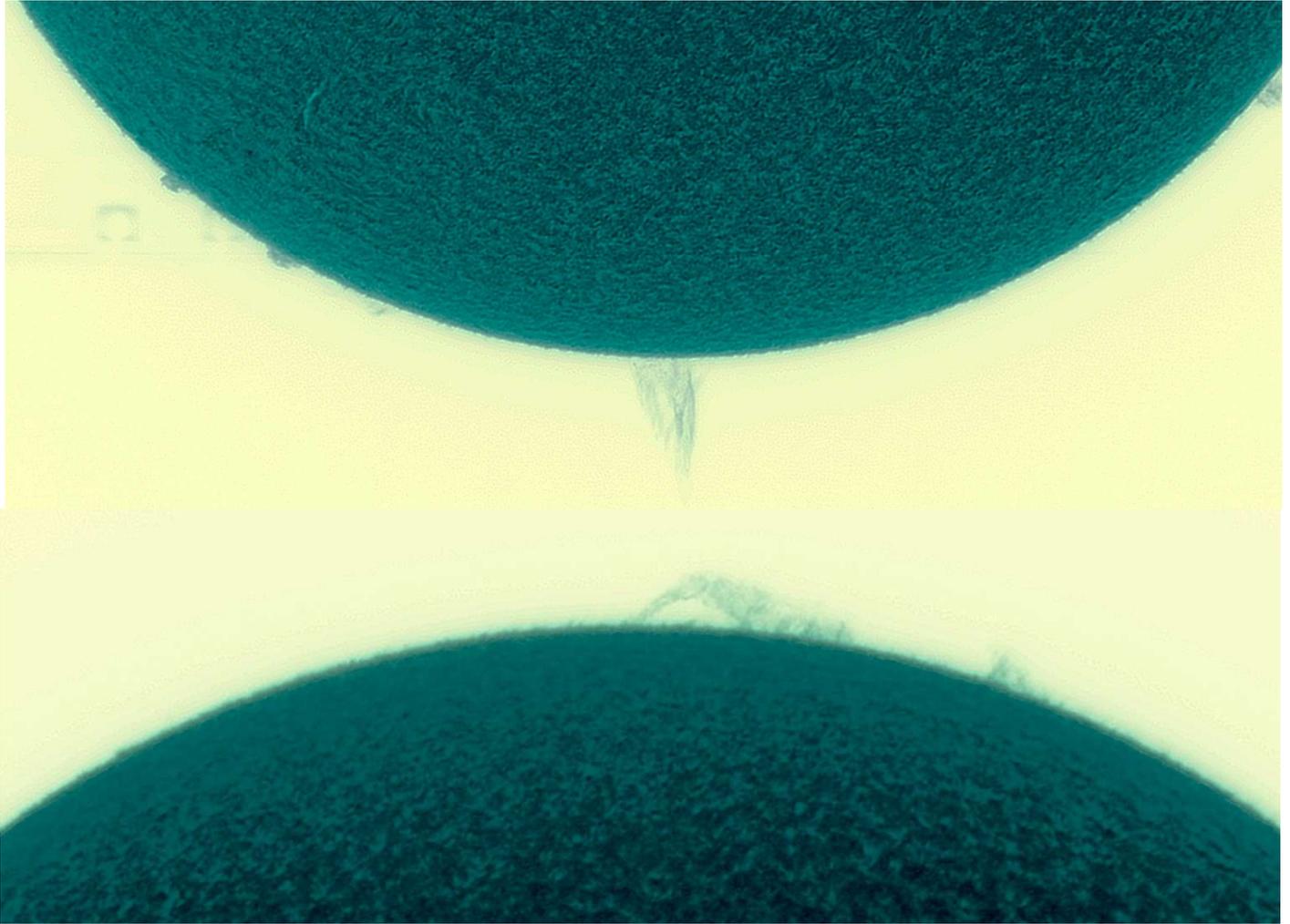
Several planets put on good displays this month:

- **Jupiter** shines brightly in the southwest after sunset, especially striking during its **26 March** meeting with the Moon. Magnitude -2.2 to -2.0
- **Mercury** reaches its **best morning visibility of the year** on **29 March**, appearing low but bright in the dawn twilight. Magnitude -0.3 to $+1.0$
- **Venus** appears near Mercury around **18 March**, forming a shortlived but eye-catching pairing in the western sky. Magnitude ~ -3.9

March is one of the better months of 2026 for spotting Mercury, so early risers are rewarded.

March is a quiet month for meteors.

Members Photo Gallery



The Sun in Hydrogen Alpha wavelengths. These are "inverted" images. The Sun displays as red in the Hydrogen Alpha wavelengths.

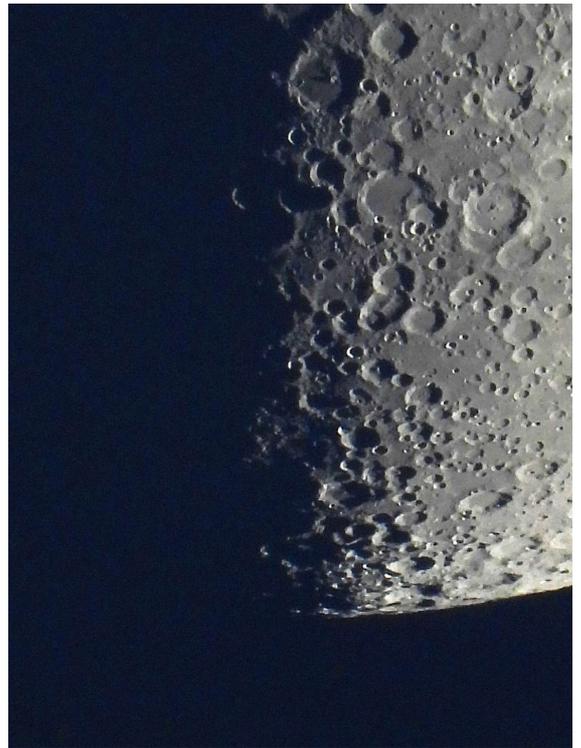
Matthew Terrell 22 February 2026



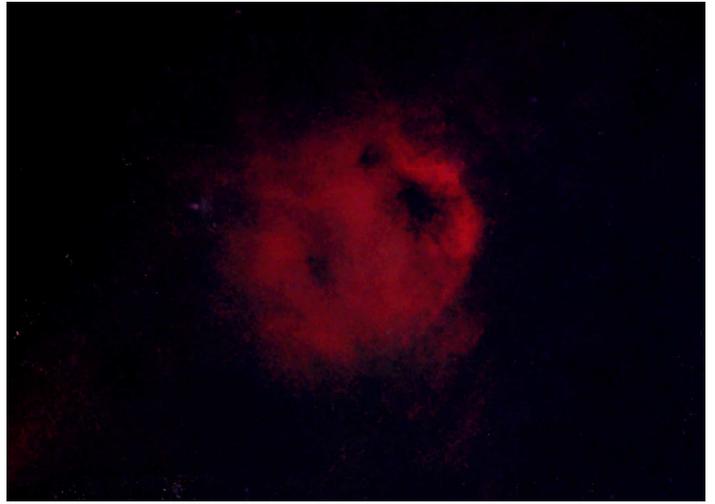
The Moon 22 February 2026 5.5 day phase



The Moon 25 February 2026 6.5 day phase



Lovely set of Lunar images from Andy Burns



24/25 February 2026, the first decent night in months, this is SH2-173, the Phantom of the Opera. First with standard processing and second with stars removed.

Images by Steve Allen



A few images of Jupiter from 25 February 2026. Focal Length of 2000mm. Stacked using the Sharpcap Live Stack feature. Images by Matthew Terrell

Constellation Focus – Hercules

Hercules constellation is located in the northern sky. It was named after Hercules, the Roman version of the Greek hero Heracles.

Heracles, in turn, was often associated with the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, and the constellation itself has a long history, dating back to Sumerian times.

Hercules is the fifth largest constellation in the sky, but has no first magnitude stars. In traditional depictions, the star Ras Algethi (Alpha Herculis) represents Hercules' head and a prominent asterism, the **Keystone**, marks his torso, as he stands victoriously on Draco's head.

In mythology, the constellation Hercules is usually associated with the penultimate labour of Heracles, which involved defeating the dragon Ladon, who guarded the garden of the Hesperides. The dragon is represented by the constellation Draco. Hercules constellation was first catalogued by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy in the 2nd century.

Notable deep sky objects in Hercules include the Great Globular Cluster (**Messier 13**), the globular cluster **Messier 92**, the planetary nebulae **Abell 39** and the **Turtle Nebula** (NGC 6210), the radio galaxy **Hercules A**, the Hercules Cluster of galaxies, and the galaxy cluster **Abell 2199**.

Hercules is the fifth largest constellation. It occupies an area of 1225 square degrees in the sky. The constellation lies in the third quadrant of the northern hemisphere (NQ3) and can be seen at latitudes between +90° and -50°. Hercules contains two Messier objects – Messier 13 (M13, NGC 6205) and Messier 92 (M92, NGC 6341) – and has 12 stars with known planets. The brightest star in the constellation is Kornephoros, Beta Herculis, with an apparent magnitude of 2.81. The Tau Herculids are the only meteor shower associated with the constellation.

ASTERISM: The Keystone

The **Keystone** asterism is formed by four bright stars in Hercules – Pi, Eta, Zeta, and Epsilon Herculis – and it represents Hercules' torso.

Messier 13, also known as the Hercules Globular Cluster or Great Globular Cluster, is a globular cluster that consists of about 300,000 stars located in Hercules constellation. The cluster is 20 arc minutes in size and has an apparent magnitude of 5.8. It is approximately 22,200 light years distant.

The Hercules Globular Cluster was discovered by the English astronomer Edmond Halley in 1714 and included in **Messier's catalogue** as Messier 13 on June 1, 1764. The cluster can easily be seen in small telescopes, but is hard to find without visual aids even on a clear night.

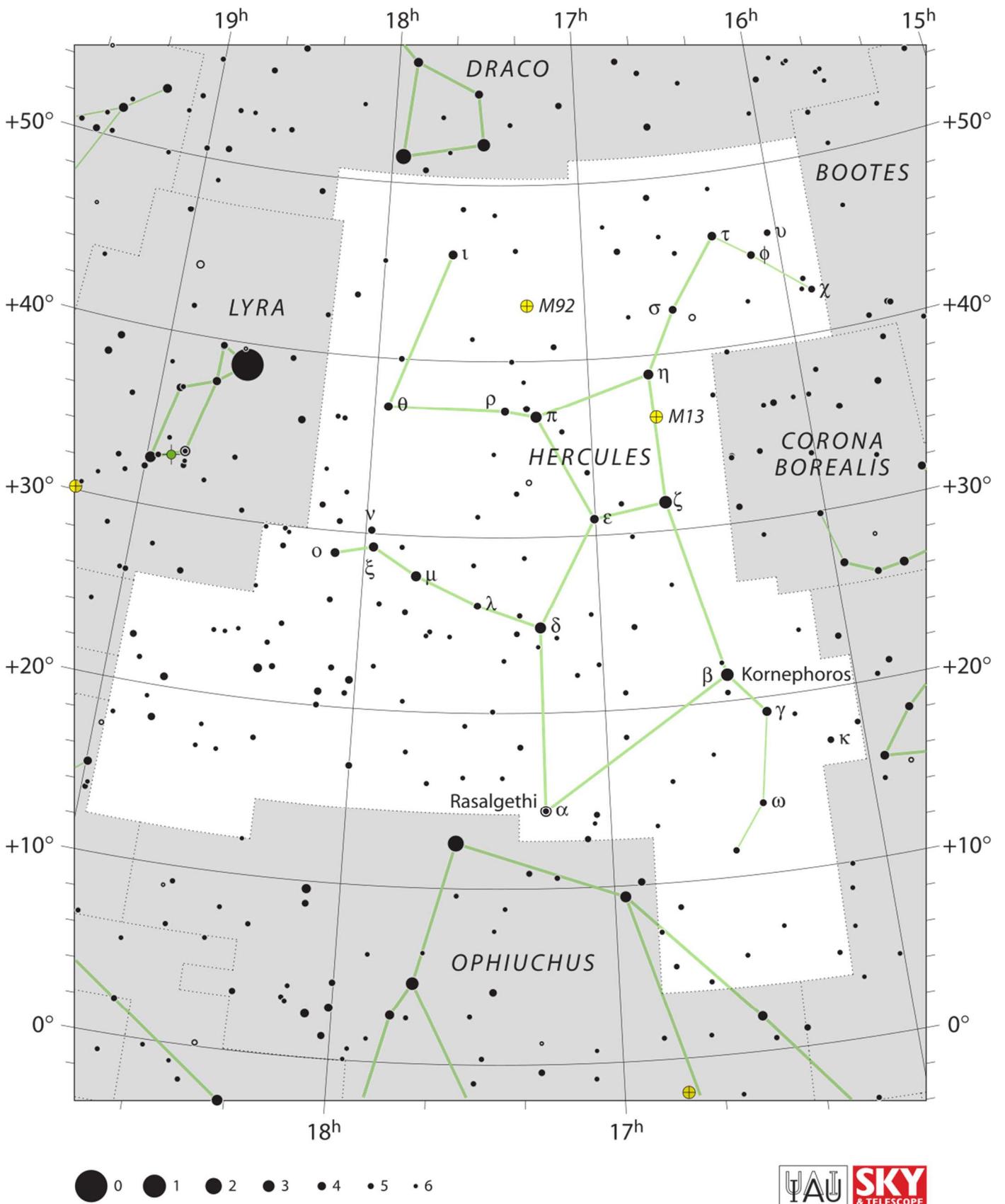
M13 is 145 light years in diameter. The brightest star in the cluster is V11, a variable star with a visual magnitude of 11.95.

Messier 92 is another well-known globular cluster in the Hercules constellation. It was discovered by the German astronomer Johann Elert Bode in 1777 and then independently discovered by Charles Messier in 1781.

Messier 92 is relatively bright. It has an apparent magnitude of 6.3 and is approximately 26,700 light years distant from the Sun. It is one of the oldest clusters in the Milky Way, with an estimated age of 14.2 billion years, which is the same age as the universe itself.

The Hercules Cluster is a galaxy cluster about 500 million light years from the solar system. It contains about 200 galaxies and is particularly rich in spirals. It is part of the larger Hercules Supercluster (SCI 160).

Constellation Focus – Hercules



Return to the Moon



NASA's revised Artemis schedule marks the most significant reshaping of the Moon-return roadmap since the program began, shifting from an ambitious leap to a more incremental, risk-managed approach. The new timeline introduces an additional test mission, redistributes responsibilities across Artemis III and IV, and aims to accelerate launch cadence while improving safety and reliability.

Why NASA Changed Course

NASA leadership acknowledged that the original plan—moving from one uncrewed mission to a lunar landing in just two crewed flights—stacked too many “firsts” into a single step. Safety advisors raised concerns about untested systems, while repeated technical issues with the Space Launch System (SLS) and Orion spacecraft underscored the need for a more methodical build-up.

Artemis II's launch has slipped to no earlier than April 2026 due to helium pressurization and hydrogen leak issues.

NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman emphasized the need to “get back to basics,” increasing flight frequency to prevent skills and processes from atrophying between missions.

The New Artemis Mission Sequence

The updated schedule restructures the next several missions into a clearer, step-by-step progression.

- Artemis II — April 2026 (no earlier than)

A crewed lunar flyby remains the core objective, but the mission has been repeatedly delayed due to SLS technical issues. It will now serve as the essential proving flight before more complex operations begin.

- Artemis III — 2027

Originally intended as the first crewed lunar landing since Apollo, Artemis III has been redefined as an Earth-orbit docking and systems test.

Orion will rendezvous with commercial lunar landers from SpaceX and Blue Origin in low Earth orbit. The mission will test navigation, propulsion, life-support integration, and new xEVA spacesuits.

This shift removes the pressure of attempting a landing before systems are fully validated.

Artemis IV — Early 2028

Now designated as the first crewed lunar landing of the revised plan.

- Astronauts will descend to the surface using commercial landers.
- The mission incorporates lessons from the 2027 docking tests.

NASA aims to re-establish a human presence on the Moon for the first time since 1972.

Artemis V — Late 2028 (possible)

A second landing mission may follow within the same year, reflecting NASA's goal of achieving a 10-month launch cadence rather than multi-year gaps.

The decision to reschedule Artemis III is a sensible one, and in many ways echoes the proven logic of the Apollo programme. By shifting the mission toward testing the new vehicles and procedures in the relative safety of Earth orbit—much as Apollo 9 did—NASA is giving itself the chance to validate critical systems before committing to a lunar landing. If Artemis III performs well, a surface mission can follow with far greater confidence.

It's encouraging to see NASA drawing directly on Apollo-era lessons: build capability step by step, test thoroughly, and avoid stacking too many first-time events into a single mission. This more measured approach should strengthen the overall programme and improve the likelihood of long-term success as humanity prepares to return to the Moon.

Comet 3I/ATLAS: A Visitor From Beyond the Solar System

Comet 3I/ATLAS was first spotted in July 2025 by the Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System (ATLAS), and soon confirmed as an interstellar object—its hyperbolic trajectory proving it originated from another star system. This makes it only the third such visitor after 1I/Oumuamua and 2I/Borisov.

Several features make 3I/ATLAS especially intriguing:

- **Active and dynamic:** It developed a bright coma and tail as it neared the Sun, venting jets, filaments, and streams of dust and gas.
- **Rich chemistry:** Observations from Hubble, JWST, and ground-based telescopes show it contains carbon dioxide, water ice, carbon monoxide, and even cyanide gas—remarkably similar to Solar System comets.
- **Water detected far from the Sun:** NASA’s Swift Observatory detected hydroxyl emissions—evidence of water—when the comet was still nearly three times farther from the Sun than Earth, suggesting unusual activity mechanisms.
- **A dramatic solar encounter:** Its closest approach to the Sun on 29 October 2025 triggered significant outgassing, including a burst of organic molecules.

By early 2026, 3I/ATLAS was already heading out of the Solar System toward Gemini, fading from Earth’s view but still within reach of deep-space observers.

JUICE: A Jupiter Mission With Perfect Timing

ESA’s JUICE spacecraft, launched in April 2023, is on an eight-year journey to Jupiter to study its icy moons—Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto. It won’t arrive until 2031, but during its cruise phase it has already made a scientific splash.

On 6 November 2025, just a week after 3I/ATLAS passed perihelion, JUICE turned its JANUS camera toward the interstellar comet. What followed was one of the most detailed remote imaging campaigns ever conducted on such an object:

- **Over 120 high-resolution images** captured the comet’s nucleus, coma, and tail structure.
- **Five onboard instruments** collected data on its composition and activity, offering clues to how interstellar comets behave under solar heating.
- **Unique vantage point:** From deep space, JUICE avoided the glare and atmospheric interference that limited Earth-based observations.

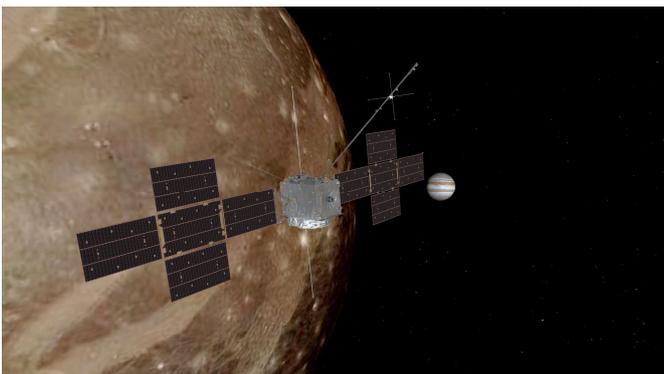
These observations are now being analysed by ESA teams, with early results expected to shed light on how comets form in other planetary systems.

Why This Matters for Astronomy

Together, 3I/ATLAS and JUICE offer a rare opportunity:

- **A direct sample** of another star system’s chemistry
- **Comparisons** between interstellar and Solar System comets
- **Insights** into how volatile ices behave under unfamiliar stellar conditions
- **A demonstration** of how planetary missions can deliver unexpected science en route

Interstellar comets are fleeting visitors—once they pass the Sun, they vanish into the dark for good. JUICE’s timely observations ensure that 3I/ATLAS will continue to inform planetary science long after it has left our neighbourhood.



2025—2026 Observing Schedule

Wiltshire Astronomical Society Planned Observing Evenings 2025-2026 Season								
Month	Day	Date	Month	Year		Event Attempt	Time	
Sep-25	Friday	19th	September	2025		1st Observing	20:30	
	What To See!	Saturn close to opposition and very bright. Rings almost Edge on.						
		Neptune almost at opposition and a good time to try to see it.						
	Friday	26th	September	2025		2nd Observing	20:30	
	What To See!	Still a good time to catch Saturn & Neptune						
Oct-25	Friday	17th	October	2025		1st Observing	20:00	
	What To See!	Orionid Meteor Shower						
	Friday	24th	October	2025		2nd Observing	20:00	
	What To See!	Orionid Meteor Shower						
Nov-25	Friday	14th	November	2025		1st Observing	19:30	
	What To See!	Leonid Meteor Shower						
		Saturns Rings almost Edge on						
	Friday	21st	November	2025		2nd Observing	19:30	
	What To See!	Saturns Rings almost Edge on						
		Uranus at Opposition just south of the Pleiades						
		Leonid Meteor Shower						
Dec-25	Friday	12th	December	2025		1st Observing	19:00	
	What To See!	Orionid Meteor Shower						
	Friday	19th	December	2025		2nd Observing	19:00	
	What To See!	Ursid Meteor Shower						
Jan-26	Friday	9th	January	2026		1st Observing	19:00	
	What To See!	Jupiter at Opposition in Gemini						
		Comet 24P/Schaumasse observable after 01:30 (10th)						
	Friday	16th	January	2026		2nd Observing	19:00	
	What To See!	Jupiter and Saturn still on display.						
Feb-26	Friday	13th	February	2026		1st Observing	19:30	
	Friday	20th	February	2026		2nd Observing	19:30	
Mar-26	Friday	13th	March	2026		1st Observing	20:00	
	Friday	20th	March	2026		2nd Observing	20:00	
Apr-26	Friday	10th	April	2026		1st Observing	20:00	
	Friday	17th	April	2026		2nd Observing	20:30	
	What To See!	Lyrid Meteor Shower						
May-26	Friday	8th	May	2026		1st Observing	21:00	
	What To See!	Eta Aquarids Meteor Shower						
	Friday	15th	May	2026		2nd Observing	21:00	

Version: 1 - Published 2025-07-30

Wiltshire AS Meeting overview 2025/26

All meetings convene from 19.15 for a 19.30 start

MONTH	TITLE	Speaker	ACTUAL DATE
Sep-25	Adventures in Infrared	Dr Jane Clark	2nd September 2025
Oct-25	The Colourful Lives of Stars - What are stars?	Michael Barratt FRAS	7th October 2025
Nov-25	Black Holes, Dark Matter and Dark Energy	Peter Allan	4th November 2025
Dec-25	Christmas Quiz	N/A	2nd December 2025
Jan-26	Filton in Space - 65 years and Counting	Terry Ransome	6th January 2026
Feb-26	John Dartnell	Capturing Totality: Tips and Techniques	3rd February 2026
Mar-26	Observing with Binoculars	Mark Radice	3rd March 2026
Apr-26	Extinct Constellations	Nicky Fleet	7th April 2026
May-26	Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, How Can I Determine What You Are?	Ken Whight	5th May 2026
Jun-26	Members Talks & AGM	Various	2nd June 2026

Wiltshire Astronomical Society Contact Info:

Chair: Simon Barnes
Newsletter: Simon Barnes
Treasurer and Membership: Sam Franklin
Speaker secretary: **Position Vacant**
Observing Sessions coordinators: Chris Brooks, Jon Gale,
Web & IT coordinator: Sam Franklin
PR and Design: Tracey Kelly

Contact the Society here:

Email: contact@wasnet.org.uk

Website url: <https://wasnet.org.uk/>

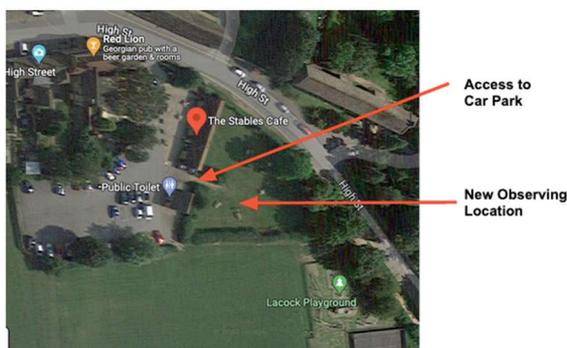
Public Facebook Page <https://www.facebook.com/Wiltshire-Astronomical-Society-154077261327030/>

Members only Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/wiltshire.astro.society/>

Committee Page: <https://wasnet.org.uk/committee/>

Observing Sessions Location: The observing area is located in the Picnic area to the side of the Red Lion Pub (Lacock) car park
Postcode: SN15 2LQ

what3words = airbag.shudders.losing



Hall Meeting Location: Pewsham Community Centre, Lodge Road, Pewsham
Chippenham, SN15 3SY

What3words = boat.perky.ticket

