

More about Mercury

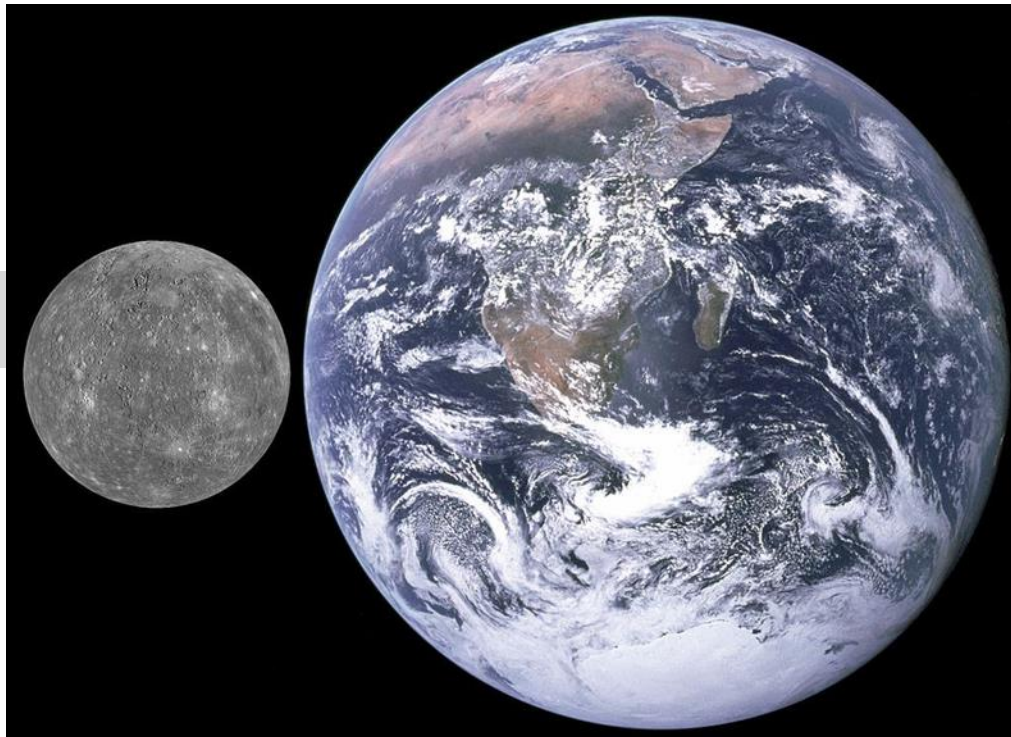


NASA Mercury Messenger Mission color-enhanced image

More about Mercury

- Mercury is the innermost planet and the smallest planet in our solar system – only slightly larger than Earth's Moon.

Mercury



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Mercury – “the Winged Messenger”

At an average distance from the Sun of 36 million miles, Mercury is on the inside lane orbiting around our star, and it completes a lap quickly – only 88 days. Hence it is named after the speedy winged messenger of the Gods.



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There is a direct correlation between the planet Mercury's rotational period and its orbital period. This is called a spin-orbit resonance, and this is a somewhat common phenomenon in the solar system. For every 2 orbits of Mercury around the sun, it rotates 3 times on its axis. This is known as **a 3:2 spin-orbit resonance**. Mercury completes an orbit in 88 days, and it completes a spin once every 59 days. [See an animation of this resonance.](#)

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Mercury is the most difficult of the 5 “naked-eye” planets to locate and observe in the sky.

It's close proximity to the Sun means it is only visible during the twilight zones of dawn and dusk.

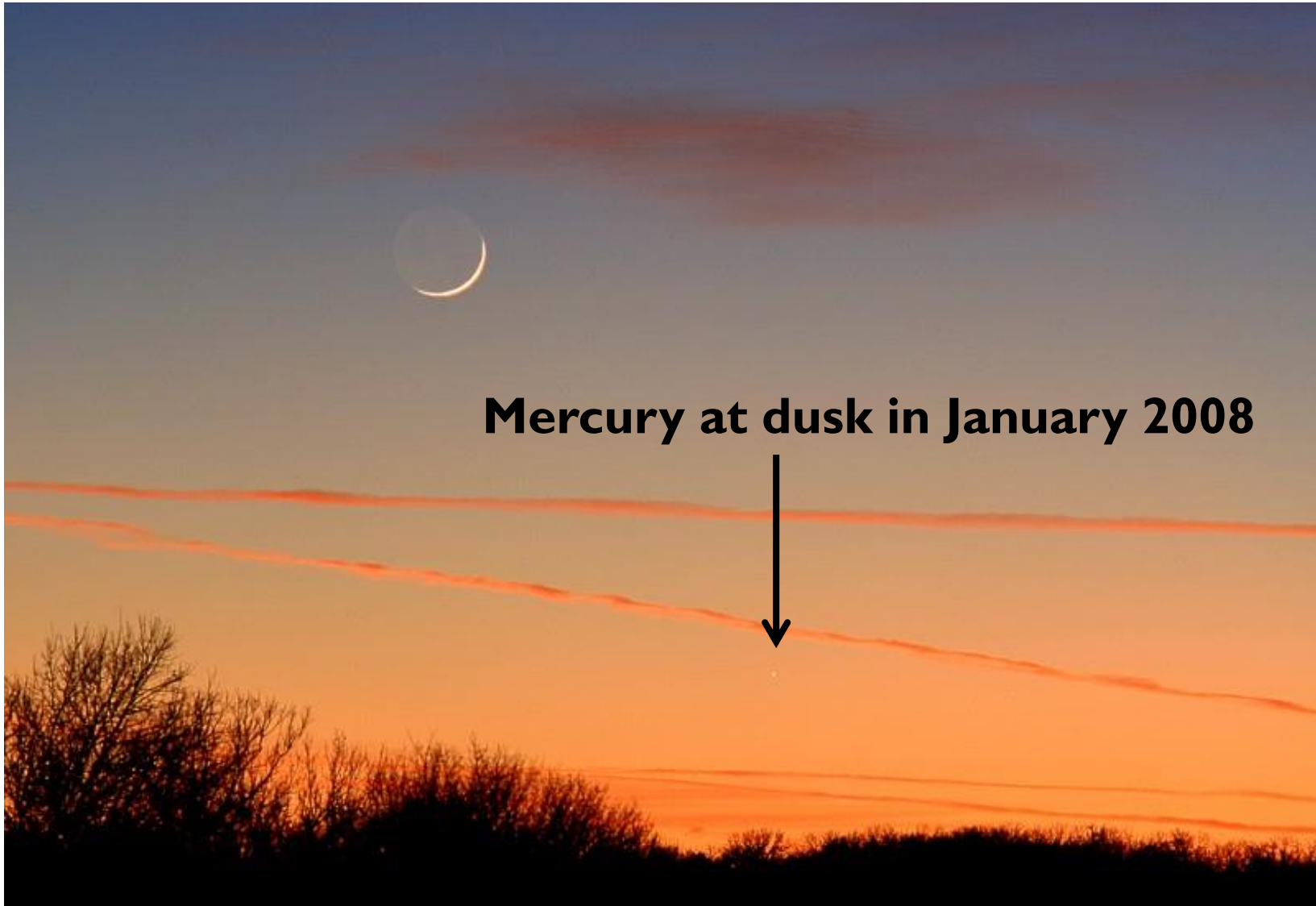
And its rapid movement means it shifts from the east to west and west to east sides of the Sun in relatively quick fashion.

The other 4 naked-eye planets are bright, slower moving, and easier to locate in the sky.

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Mercury – “the elusive one”



Mercury at dusk in January 2008

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From our perspective on Earth, Mercury (and Venus too) is seen in two unique ways that the outer planets can not be viewed.

First it goes through “phases”, like our Moon, as it orbits the Sun, and, second, it can be observed “transiting” (crossing in front of) the Sun.

You will need a telescope, equipped with a solar filter, to safely observe a “transit”.