

March 2021 Highlight

The Zodiacal Light

- ★ March is the season to find the elusive “zodiacal light” in the early evening sky.
- ★ But what is zodiacal light?
- ★ Zodiacal light is sunlight reflected from numerous dust grains located along the plane of the solar system → the ecliptic or “zodiac”. The “ecliptic” is the approximate path that the planets, Sun, and Moon follow across our sky, and it’s the zone of the “zodiac” constellations.
- ★ These dust grains are left over from the formation of the solar system (a type of cosmic interplanetary dust), and their supply is continuously fed by particles from comets and asteroid collisions.
- ★ The evening ecliptic is nearly vertical to the horizon this month, providing good opportunities to observe the zodiacal light.

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- ★ Zodiacal light is seen as a “cone” of light, widest at the horizon — pointing upward, toward the planet Mars and the Pleiades star cluster this month.
- ★ With an **unobstructed view low to the western horizon**, look for it beginning about 80 minutes after sunset.
- ★ The approximate 40-minute viewing window closes about 2 hours after sunset.
- ★ Pick a **very dark location** far from artificial lights and **without moonlight**.
- ★ The best evenings this month to see the zodiacal light, without interfering moonlight, will be during the fortnight **from March 1-14**.
- ★ In the fall, when it is visible in the morning sky, it is often called the “**false dawn**”.



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Zodiacal Light and the Milky Way