

Astronomy Club of Asheville

March 2024 Highlight

Mercury's Best Evening Appearance for 2024

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Mercury makes three evening appearances in 2024, and this month's is easily the best of them all. The planet reaches its greatest elongation (19° east of the Sun) on **March 24th**, and it sits some 12° above the west-northwestern horizon half an hour after sunset. Although that's quite a favorable placement for the innermost planet, it's still not terribly high — seek out an observing site with an unobstructed horizon and bring some binoculars along to make the hunt a little easier. At dusk today, Mercury shines at magnitude -0.2 , but with each passing evening it loses both brightness and elevation. By next Sunday (the 31st) it has dimmed to magnitude 1.4 and is 3° lower — two factors that combine to make finding the planet considerably more difficult. In other words, don't tarry if you want to catch this fast-moving little world. ***

Additional comments from the Astronomy Club of Asheville:

Of the 5 naked-eye planets known since ancient times, Mercury is the one that most folks have not wittingly observed. Two factors contribute to this situation. First, Mercury doesn't reach the high visual magnitudes of Venus, Mars, and Jupiter, but it can exceed Saturn in brightness. Second, and more importantly, Mercury never rises more than about 20° above the horizon in the Asheville area, and most of its elongations, like this one, place it much lower than that.

As a result of this innermost planet's nearness to our Sun, it is usually seen after sunset at dusk or before sunrise at dawn; it is only visible closely preceding or trailing the Sun in the sky. Both those viewing windows place Mercury in a less-than-dark sky as well.

So, take the challenge: locate and observe elusive Mercury this month!

