

09 - Saturn on Show - May 2013

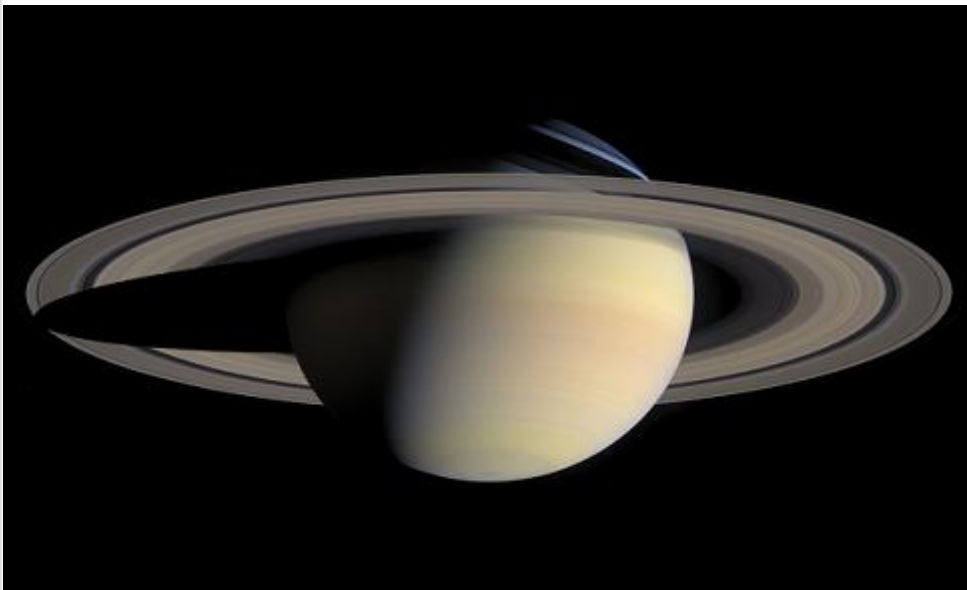
Saturn on Show

Saturn is undoubtedly the Beauty Queen of the solar system. Even the least interested in astronomy know that Saturn goes with rings, like eggs go with bacon.

Saturn is a huge gas giant. Its diameter is 120,000 km, nine times Earth's. Normally, we can see Saturn's rings easier than we can see the planet, as the rings are so big and reflect so much light. So, where, when and how can we see Saturn?

This May and June are ideal months for viewing Saturn. It is currently just past opposition and is very close and bright (for Saturn). Go outside after sunset, and look East. In mid-May around 7pm, it will be about 40° above the horizon. It will be higher as the month goes on. You will see a yellowish 'star'. That's Saturn! It will be up there all night so you have plenty of time to see it.

Good sized binoculars should show what looks like an egg shape (sorry – no bacon). That is Saturn's disc, with the ends of the rings making it look like an ellipse, or a yellow ball with cauliflower ears. A medium sized telescope will show the rings. The bigger the telescope, the clearer the rings. And how beautiful they are! Even though to us on Earth, they look like a single ring, close up to space probe cameras they are broken into thousands of ringlets, just like the grooves on an old LP record. The amazing thing is that although the rings have an outer diameter of 270,000 km, they are only about 100 metres thick. To that scale, it's like having a CD about 5 km diameter



But when you're standing there, admiring Saturn and its rings, remember... they are 1.2 billion km away. What you are seeing is over one hour old!