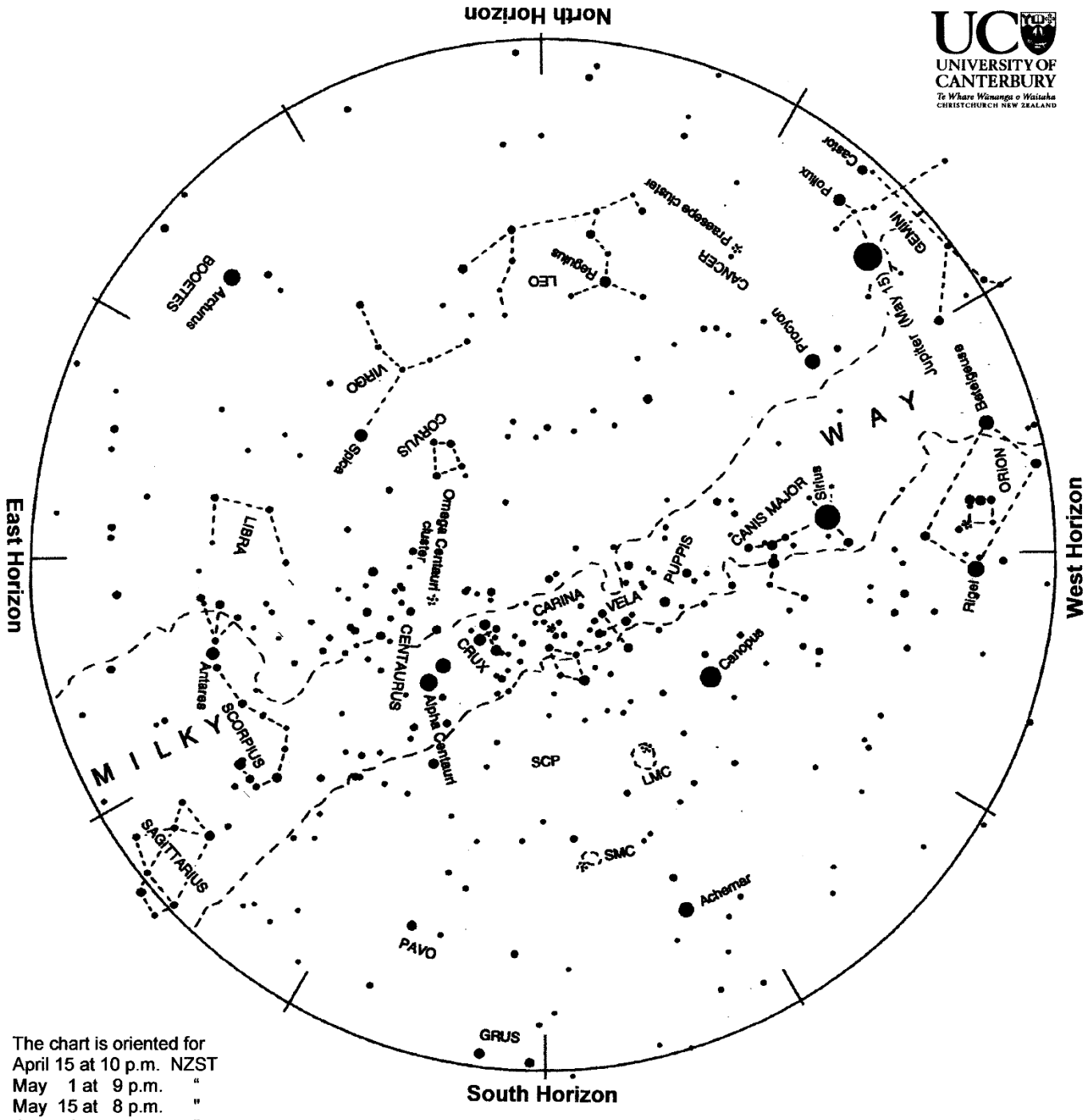


The chart is oriented for
April 15 at 10 p.m. NZST
May 1 at 9 p.m. "
May 15 at 8 p.m. "
June 1 at 7 p.m. "

Evening sky in May 2026

To use the chart, hold it up to the sky. Turn the chart so the direction you are looking is at the bottom of the chart. If you are looking to the south then have 'South horizon' at the lower edge. As the earth turns the sky appears to rotate clockwise around the south celestial pole (SCP on the chart). Stars rise in the east and set in the west, just like the sun. The sky makes a small extra westward shift each night as we orbit the sun.

Jupiter and Venus are the 'evening stars', appearing in the north and northwest soon after sunset. Venus sets before 8 pm, so isn't on the chart. Sirius, the brightest true star, is midway down the western sky. Directly below it are bright stars Rigel and Betelgeuse with 'The Pot' between them. Canopus, the second brightest star, is southwest of overhead. Crux, the Southern Cross, and the Pointers, Alpha and Beta Centauri, are southeast of the zenith. Orange Arcturus, low in the northeast, often twinkles red and green. Scorpius, with orange Antares at its heart, is low in the southeast sky where the Milky Way is broadest and brightest.

Chart produced by Guide 8 software; www.projectpluto.com. Labels and text added by Alan Gilmore,
Mt John Observatory of the University of Canterbury. www.canterbury.ac.nz

The Night Sky in May 2026

Venus and **Jupiter** are the 'evening stars'. Both appear in the northwest soon after sunset. Silver Venus is low in the sky; golden Jupiter is higher. Venus sets around 6:50 pm at the beginning of May and around 7:20 at the end (so isn't on the chart). Jupiter sets around 9:50 at the beginning of the month and soon after 8 pm at the end. By the end of the month the two planets will be getting close together. (They will be just 1.6°, three full-moon widths, apart on June 10.) The Moon will be near Venus on the 19th and near Jupiter on the 20th.

As the sky darkens **Sirius** appears midway down the western sky. It is the brightest true star and twinkles with all colours when setting in the southwest in the late evening. It is the 'Dog Star', marking the head of **Canis Major** the big dog, now head down, tail up. **Canopus**, the second brightest star**,** is southwest of overhead. Below Sirius are bluish **Rigel** and reddish **Betelgeuse**, the brightest stars in **Orion**. Between them is a line of three stars, Orion's belt. To southern hemisphere star watchers, the line of three makes the bottom of 'The Pot', now tipped on its side.

Orange **Arcturus** is the brightest star in the northern sky, rising in the northeast at dusk. It often twinkles red and green when low in the sky. It is 37 light-years* away and about 120 times brighter than the sun.

Crux, the Southern Cross, is southeast of the zenith, to the right of 'The Pointers'. **Alpha Centauri**, the brighter Pointer, is the closest naked-eye star, 4.3 light years away. Beta Centauri, like most of the stars in Crux, is a blue-giant star hundreds of light years away. Canopus is also very luminous and distant: 13 000 times brighter than the sun and 300 light-years away.

Following the Milky Way down into the southeast finds **Scorpius**. Orange **Antares** marks the Scorpion's body. The scorpion's upside-down tail curves to the right of Antares. There is a Greek legend that the Scorpion and Orion were always fighting so a goddess put them on opposite sides of the sky, so they never appeared in the sky together. It doesn't work for the southern hemisphere.
The Moon hides (occults) Antares on May 31st. It moves in front of the star around 7:30 or later, depending on your location. Antares reappears around 8:40.

The **Milky Way** is brightest in the southeast toward Scorpius and **Sagittarius**. In a dark sky it can be traced up past the Pointers and Crux, fading toward Sirius. The Milky Way is our edgewise view of the galaxy, the pancake of billions of stars of which the sun is just one. The thick hub of the galaxy, 27 000 light-years away, is in Sagittarius. The nearby outer edge is by Orion where the Milky Way is faintest. A scan along the Milky Way with binoculars shows many clusters of stars and some glowing gas clouds, particularly in **Carina** and Scorpius.

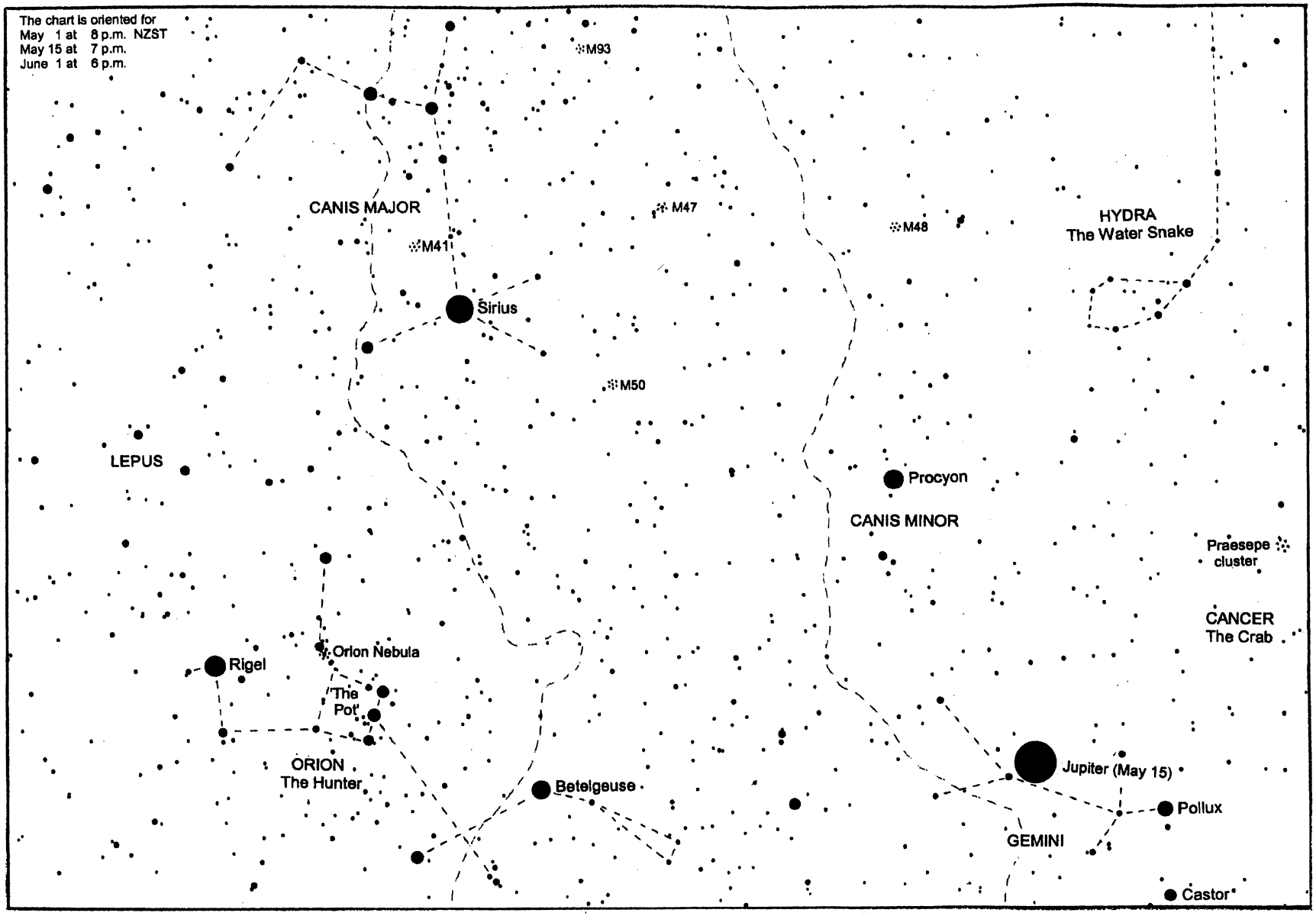
The Clouds of Magellan, **LMC** and **SMC**, are midway down the southern sky, easily seen by eye on a dark moonless night. They are small galaxies. The Large Magellanic Cloud is 160 000 light-years away and the Small Cloud is around 200 000 light-years away. They are much smaller than our Milky Way Galaxy but there are many billions of stars in each.

Some meteors might be seen in the pre-dawn sky around May 6-7 as the Eta Aquarid meteor shower peaks. Up to 30 meteors per hour can be seen in a dark sky but at this year's peak there is a bright Moon hiding the fainter meteors. The shower runs from late April to late May. The meteors are dust from Halley's comet, hitting the air at high speed and burning up.

At the beginning of the month three medium-bright planets make a vertical line low in the eastern dawn sky. Saturn, cream coloured, is highest. Below Saturn, and a bit fainter, is reddish Mars. Mercury is at the bottom of the line, rising 70 minutes before the Sun. Mercury soon sinks into the twilight as it moves to the other side of the Sun. Saturn moves higher, rising around 2:30 a.m. at the end of May. Mars stays put, rising around 5 a.m. through the month.

*A **light-year** (**l.y**.)is the distance that light travels in one year: nearly 10 million million km. Sunlight takes eight minutes to get here; moonlight about one second. Sunlight reaches Neptune, the outermost major planet, in four hours. It takes sunlight four years to reach the nearest star, Alpha Centauri.

Notes by Alan Gilmore, University of Canterbury's Mt John Observatory, P.O. Box 56, Lake Tekapo 7945, New Zealand.
www.canterbury.ac.nz 260403



Northwest Evening Sky in May 2026

The chart shows the northwest sky in the evening. Jupiter, the brightest 'star' in the evening sky (after Venus sets), is a beacon for the region before it sets around 9 p.m. The chart may need to be tilted to the left to match the sky, depending on the time.

Chart produced by Guide 8 software; www.projectpluto.com. Labels and text added by Alan Gilmore,
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Interesting Objects in the Northwest Evening Sky in May 2026

Jupiter, the higher of the two 'evening stars', is a beacon for this region. It appears low in the north soon after sunset. At the beginning of the month it sets in the northwest around 9:50 p.m. At the end of May it sets around 8:10. We are looking at Jupiter through a lot of air, so it is often blurry in a telescope. Still, any telescope should show its four bright 'Galilean' moons lined up on each side. Not all four are seen every night as they pass in front of Jupiter and behind it and are eclipsed in the planet's shadow. Jupiter is 860 million km away mid-month.

Midway down the western sky is **Sirius**, the brightest true star, but fainter than Jupiter. Sirius appears bright because it is 23 times brighter than the sun in true brightness and because it is relatively close at 8.6 light-years (l.y)* away. Sirius often twinkles like a diamond when it is low in the sky, as the air disperses its white light into separate colours.

Below Sirius are bluish **Rigel** and orange **Betelgeuse**, the brightest stars in **Orion** the hunter or warrior. Orion is upside down in our southern hemisphere view. The line of three stars between Rigel and Betelgeuse makes Orion's Belt. The line of faint stars above and left of the belt form Orion's Sword hanging from his belt in the northern hemisphere view. To most southern hemisphere sky watchers the belt and sword form **The Pot** or The Saucepan, now tilted on its side.

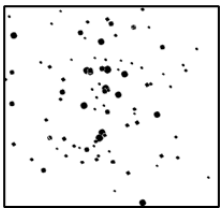
The **Orion Nebula** is visible in binoculars as a misty glow around the middle stars of Orion's Sword or the handle of The Pot. It is a vast cloud of dust and gas about 1300 l.y. away and more than 20 l.y. across. Ultra-violet light from a massive, extremely hot star in the cloud causes it to glow. Some stars in this region are less than a million years old and a few of the brightest may be much younger still. The sun, by contrast, is 4.6 billion years old. There are many bright and dark nebulae in this part of the sky. The Horsehead nebula, a favourite of astronomy books, is beside the top star of Orion's Belt, but too faint to be seen in small telescopes.

Sirius marks the head of Canis Major, the bigger of the two dogs following Orion the hunter down the sky. The dog's hindquarters are outlined by the stars above Sirius, off the top of the chart. Well to the right of Sirius, and lower, is **Procyon**, marking the head of the small dog, Canis Minor.

Below Orion, near the northwest skyline, is orange **Aldebaran** making one eye of Taurus the bull.

To the right of Jupiter, and a little lower, are **Pollux** and **Castor**, the heads of **Gemini** the twins. Though paired in myths, Castor and Pollux are not related at all. Castor is a hot white star like Sirius but 52 light-years away. Golden Pollux is bigger and brighter but cooler than Sirius and 34 light-years away.

Well above and right of Jupiter and the Twins is a luminous spot, the **Praesepe** star cluster, marking the shell of **Cancer** the Crab.



The Praesepe cluster is also called the Beehive. Binoculars show why. It is 620 million years old. Because it is old, its brightest stars long ago burned out. So its stars appear more similar in brightness than do the stars in the Pleiades/Matariki cluster (~100 million years old) or the Jewel Box (~16 million years old.) It is 580 light-years away.

The Milky Way is faint in this region as we are looking toward the nearby edge of the Galaxy's disk. Several star clusters visible in binoculars or small telescopes are marked with asterisks.

*A **light-year (l.y.)** is the distance light travels in one year: about 10 million million km (10^13 km) or 6 million million miles. Light from the sun reaches us in 8 minutes. Light from the moon gets here in 1 second. Sunlight takes 4 hours to reach Neptune, the outermost significant planet, and 4 years to reach Alpha Centauri, the nearest star.

Picture and words by Alan Gilmore, University of Canterbury's Mt John Observatory, Lake Tekapo, New Zealand.
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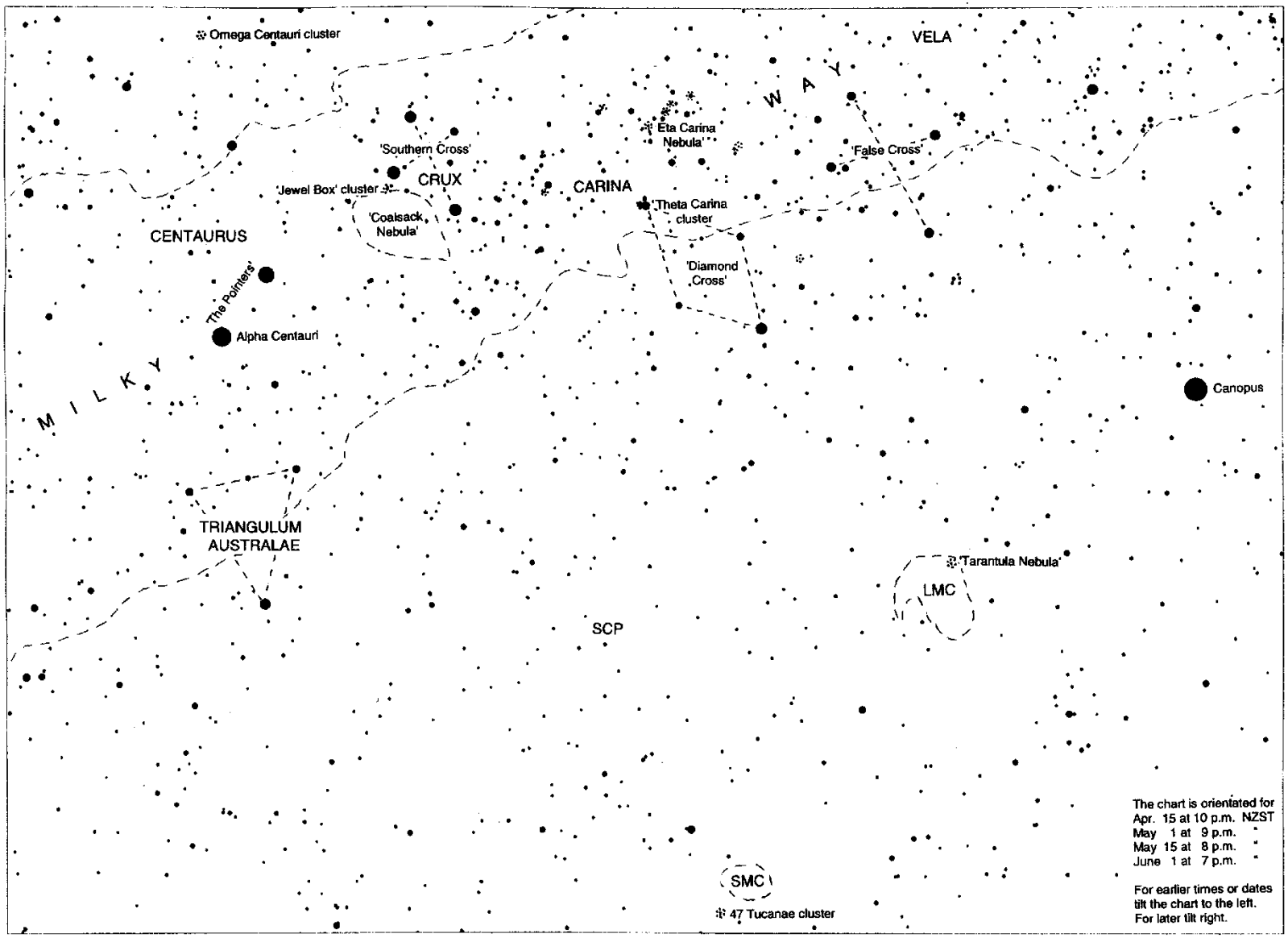

Southern Evening Sky in May

The chart shows the area of sky from just south of overhead to midway down the southern sky.
Interesting star clusters and nebulae are indicated with asterisks. They are described on the other side of this page.

Chart produced by Guide 8 software; www.projectpluto.com. Labels added by Alan Gilmore, University of Canterbury's Mt John Observatory
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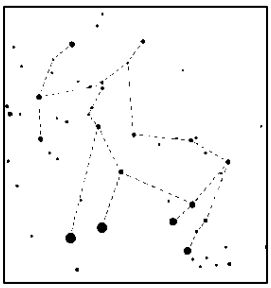
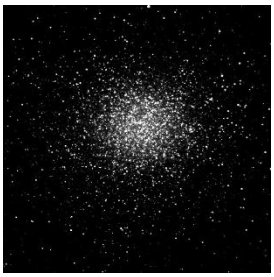
Interesting Objects in the Southern Sky



Centaurus, with the bright 'Pointers'**,** and **Crux**, the Southern Cross are south-east of overhead, the tightest grouping of bright stars in the sky. Originally Crux was the hind legs of the Centaur, the horse-man of Greek mythology. The complete Centaur, with bow, is outlined at left. It was only in the 17th Century that Crux was split off as a separate constellation. The slow wobble of Earth's axis allowed this part of the sky to be seen from more northerly places in ancient times. The fainter Pointer and the three bluish-white stars of the Crux are all super-bright stars hundreds of light-years away. Alpha Centauri is just 4.3 light-years* away and the reddish top star of Crux is 90 light years from us.



Omega Centauri, also southeast of the zenith, is a globular cluster, a ball-shaped cluster of millions of stars. Its total mass is six million times the sun's mass or weight. It is 17 000 light-years away and 200 light-years across. Globular clusters are very ancient, around 10 billion years old, twice the age of the sun. Omega Centauri is the biggest of the hundred-odd globulars randomly orbiting our galaxy. It may originally have been the core of a small galaxy that collided with the Milky Way and was stripped of its outer stars.
47 Tucanae, by the SMC, is a similar sort of cluster 16 000 l.y. away.

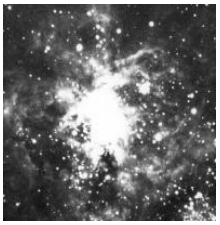
Coalsack nebula, left of Crux, looks like a hole in the Milky Way. It is a cloud of dust and gas 600 light years away, dimming the distant stars in the Milky Way. Many 'dark nebulae' can be seen along the Milky Way, appearing as slots and holes.

The Jewel Box is a compact cluster of young luminous stars 6400 light-years away. The cluster formed about 14 million years ago. To the eye it looks like a faint star.

Eta Carinae nebula, a luminous spot in the Milky Way to the right of Crux, is a glowing gas cloud about 8000 light-years from us. The thin gas glows in the ultra-violet light of nearby hot young stars.

The golden star in the cloud, visible in binoculars, is Eta [Greek 'e'] Carinae. It is estimated to be to be 80 times heavier than the sun. It is four million times brighter than the sun but is dimmed by dust clouds around it. It is expected to explode as a supernova in the next few thousand years. Many star clusters are found in this part of the sky.

Large & Small Clouds of Magellan (LMC & SMC) appear as two luminous clouds, easily seen by eye in a dark sky. They are galaxies like the Milky Way but much smaller. Each is made of billions of stars. The Large Cloud contains many clusters of young bright stars seen as patches of light in binoculars. The Large Cloud is 160 000 light-years away, the Small Cloud 200 000 light-years; very close by for galaxies.



Tarantula nebula is a glowing gas cloud in the LMC. The gas glows in the ultra-violet light from a cluster of very hot stars at the centre of the nebula. The cloud is about 800 light-years across. It is easily seen in binoculars and can be seen by eye on moonless nights. This nebula is one of the brightest known. If it was as close as the Orion nebula then it would be as bright as the full moon.

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