When to use this chart
1 Feb at 24:00 AEDT (11:00 UT)
15 Feb at 23:00 AEDT (12:00 UT)
29 Feb at 22:00 AEDT (11:00 UT)

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

With Glenn Dawes
View the Winter Hexagon, the night sky’s brightest asterism, and Gemini’s mythical twins

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FEBRUARY HIGHLIGHTS

February’s evenings find the largest and most impressive asterism of stars standing on the northern horizon, the Winter Hexagon. Starting with Sirius, near the zenith, proceed anticlockwise to Rigel, then Aldebaran and onto the lowest member, Capella, just above the horizon. The shape is completed by the twins (Castor and Pollux) and Procyon. The hexagon is the brightest asterism, encompassing seven of the 20 brightest stars in the heavens.

The chart accurately matches the sky on the dates and times shown for Sydney, Australia. The sky is different at other times as the stars cross it set four minutes earlier each night.

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THE PLANETS

Venus continues being the evening star and hard to ignore in the early western sky. For the first half of February, Mercury can be found deeper in the twilight glaze (20° to the lower left of Venus), before dropping into solar conjunction by the month’s end. Uranus needs to be caught early as it’s setting mid-evening. The morning is busy with Mars visible around 02:00, followed by Jupiter then Saturn, the three making an alignment near the Teapot of Sagittarius in the predawn eastern sky.

DEEP-SKY OBJECTS

The region near the feet of the Gemini twins contains some impressive open star clusters, such as M35 (NGC 2168, RA 6h 08.9m, dec. +24° 20’). Located about 3° northwest of the naked-eye pair of stars, Mu andEta Geminorum, this 5th magnitude open cluster is composed of around 100 stars in an area of about 0.5 across. The stars vary in brightness and appear haphazardly scattered, with the fainter outer members blending into the surrounding star field. See how some of the prominent stars form curved lines and find an east-west star-starred band dissecting M35 – it’s a very attractive sight.

A low power eyepiece shows another cluster in the same field as M35 (0.5° southwest), NGC 2158. A 15-20cm instrument shows this 7th magnitude cluster as a 0.1 diameter glowing cloud, while larger scopes reveal a collection of faint stars.