

15.4.3 Planets

p. 357 The planets that are visible to the naked eye are Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Mercury is also visible, but because it is very close to the Sun it can only be seen a few days a year. The best times to see planets are at sunrise and sunset when they are the first and last 'stars' to fade, and they lie along the same path that the Sun and Moon follow in the sky. Stellarium and other night sky software provide the position of planets visible for any date against the background of stars. Venus appears as a very bright star, Mars is red, Jupiter and Saturn are similar in that they are bright and yellowish. One trick for determining planets is that planets appear to twinkle less; another is to learn the bright stars in constellations well enough to recognize the presence of an extra 'star'. It is easiest to create charts before commencing field research that have the planets indicated. Very few researchers have collected detailed information on Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and Mercury, perhaps due to their own inability to distinguish these from bright stars or the invisibility of Mercury. A pair of binoculars is helpful in positively identifying Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn and for initiating conversations about planets which appear as disks rather than points in binoculars. The moons of Mars and Jupiter lie along a straight line looking like tiny stars near the planet. A good pair of binoculars will show the rings of Saturn.