

Zodiac constellation 8: Pisces

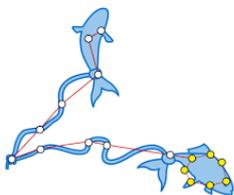


Although the two fish form the 14th largest constellation, the V-shape of Pisces (Latin for 'fish') is not prominent. It lies between Aquarius to the west and Aries further east. It is another of the group of water-related constellation in the 'Water' or 'Sea' region of the sky.

The Sun is in Pisces from mid-March to late-April ie at time of vernal (spring) equinox in the northern hemisphere. It contains the point where the Sun crosses the celestial equator from the south into the northern hemisphere on 20 March, each year. It is the point where the zero hours line of right ascension (celestial longitude) and 0 degrees declination (celestial latitude) intersect. Although also known as the first point of Aries, this label proves that orbital mechanics are not fixed. When the system was first established, the vernal equinox occurred when the Sun was in Aries. However, the wobble of Earth caused by precession means that this point is gradually moving west along the celestial equator. Its present position in Pisces will also change and it will enter neighbouring Aquarius in ca 2600 CE.

Pisces has its origin in Babylonian astronomy. In later Greek mythology Pisces represents Aphrodite and her son Eros who transformed themselves into fish, tied themselves together with a rope and plunged into Euphrates to escape the monster Typhon.

Notable features include:



- The Circlet: a ring of seven stars forming the body of one of the fish (yellow dots in diagram)
- M74: a face-on spiral galaxy 30 million ly away. It was discovered in 1870 by the French astronomer Pierre Mechain. It contains many clusters of young stars and associated nebulae, evidence of large regions of star formation. In 2003 Robert Evans discovered a Type II supernova of a red supergiant in its outer regions. Through a telescope the galaxy appears as a rounded glow with bright centre
- Piscids meteor shower: active from September to October. Its meteors are mostly slow and longish lasting. It is not always recognised as a discreet shower; the activity may be general background from anthelion radiants (a broad weak source of meteors caused by particles of interplanetary dust which move faster than Earth entering atmosphere as they overtake us).

Sources: Ridpath, I (Ed) 2012 Oxford dictionary of astronomy Oxford, OUP, Ridpath, I (Ed) 2006 Astronomy London, Dorling Kindersley, en.wikipedia.org