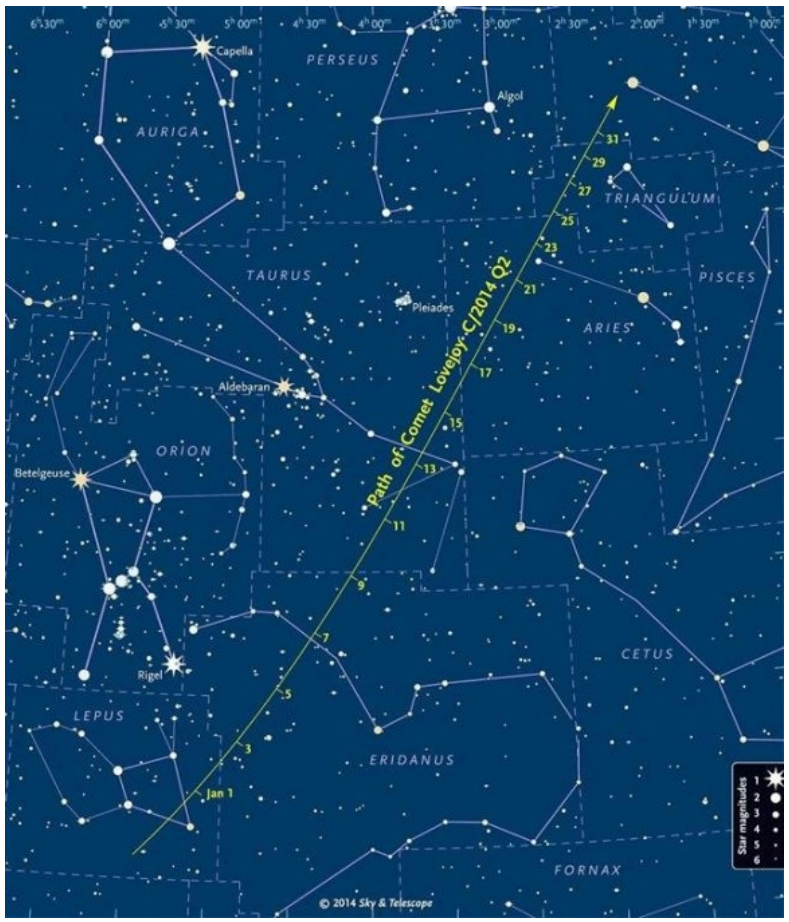
COMET LOVEJOY

The wonderful New Year's comet – Comet C/2014 Q2 Lovejoy – passed closest to Earth on 7 January 2015 and therefore appears at its brightest in our sky. On January 7, it was 70.2 million km away. Many across the globe have already seen this comet as it has brightened in recent weeks. The comet started out as a Southern Hemisphere object, but it is heading northward on the starry dome, coming now into easier viewing for Northern Hemisphere observers as it heads toward its January 30 perihelion (closest point to the sun).

The comet is a big puffball in 10×50 binoculars even through suburban light pollution. It appears as a circular patch of white light, roughly half the apparent width of the moon, moderately concentrated toward the centre, with a hint of being asymmetric but no large tail. The comet most definitely has a tail as seen in photos; we've heard some reports that it has lost and regained its tail a few times over the past weeks.

Australian comet-hunter Terry Lovejoy found this comet just before dawn on August 17, 2014 on CCD camera images, while using a Celestron C-8 telescope. Lovejoy was observing from Birkdale, Queensland, Australia. It's his fifth comet discovery since 2007.

Comet C/2014 Q2 Lovejoy is a very long-period comet. On the way into the inner solar system, at this return, its path was indicating an orbital period of roughly 11,500 years. But the gravity of our solar system's planets is thought to have altered the comet's orbit a bit. Its next return is now being projected for about 8,000 years from now.



This chart comes from SkyandTelescope.com, which has a great and concise article about viewing Comet Lovejoy. But for us in the Southern Hemisphere looking north it is an upside down mirror image. The comet was closest to Orion's Rigel on 5 January, Taurus' Aldebaran on the 13, to the Pleiades on 19, Triangulum on 29 and is now heading towards the northern horizon..

Comet Lovejoy was closest to Earth on January 7, 2015. It didn't come very close to us, hundreds of time farther away than Earth's moon. However, its closest point to Earth marked the beginning of the best time to see the comet. The wonderful New Year's comet – Comet C/2014 Q2 Lovejoy – is now heading for its January 30 perihelion, or closest point to the sun (193 million km away). Yes, it still appears as a hazy, greenish dot in our sky, at the edge of visibility to the unaided eye, but certainly visible through binoculars and telescopes.

The comet passed closest to Earth when it was 70.2 million km from us. On January 9, it crossed over into the easy-to-find constellation Taurus the Bull. Then the easy-to-see Pleiades star cluster, sometimes called the Seven Sisters, and is now heading down towards the northern horizon. Check the charts above for daily markers

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