



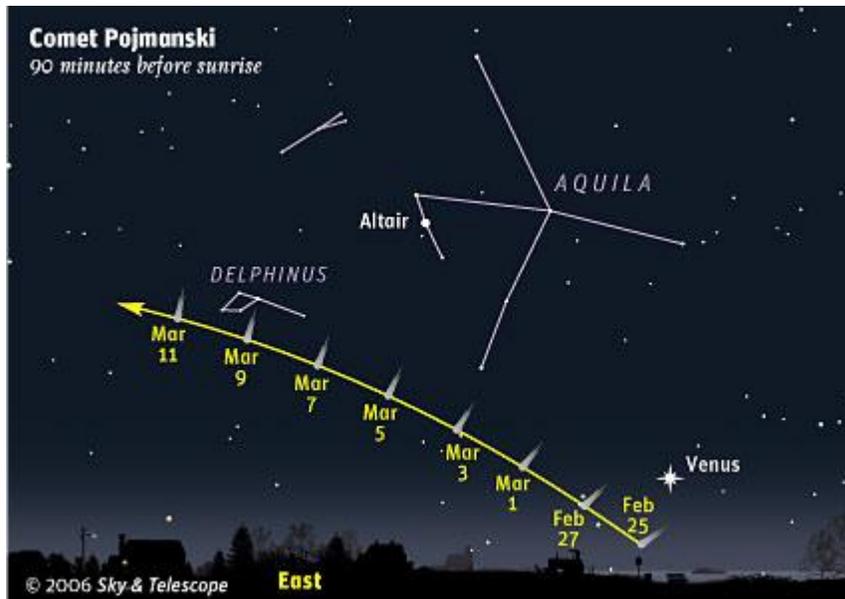
SkyandTelescope.com

[close window](#)

## A Surprise Comet in the Dawn

Set your alarm clock, and go out with binoculars at the earliest glow of daybreak.

By **Alan M. MacRobert**



Bright Venus and Altair guide the way to Comet Pojmanski's position as it emerges into dawn view, low above the east-southeast horizon. Bring binoculars! The comet will not be nearly as prominent as shown here. (The scene is drawn for the beginning of twilight as viewed from near 40° north latitude. For scale, Altair here is 24° above the horizon; that's a little more than twice the width of your fist at arm's length.) Click image for larger view. *Sky & Telescope diagram.*

Sometimes comets give us years of advance warning before they come into good view, and sometimes they take us by surprise. On January 2, 2006, Grzegorz Pojmanski at Warsaw University Astronomical Observatory in Poland noticed a faint comet on a sky-survey image taken on New Year's Day in Chile. The object was in the constellation Indus in the far southern sky. But as soon as astronomers were able to collect more position measurements and calculate an orbit, it became clear that the comet would be heading north as it rounded the Sun.

By early February Comet Pojmanski (designated C/2006 A1) was brightening faster than expected. As of February 24th it's glowing at magnitude 5.5 as it emerges into view very low in the dawn for observers at mid-northern latitudes. It's visible in binoculars — latitude and sky conditions permitting.

The time to look is just after morning twilight begins at your location. To find this time, check that your location and time zone are correct in our [online almanac](#). (And make sure the Daylight Saving Time box is unchecked.)

Go out and scan just above the horizon about 7° to 10° left or lower left of dazzlingly bright Venus during the last two days of February, as shown above. That's a slightly greater distance on the sky than the width of a typical binocular's field of view.

Note the shape of the triangle that Venus and Altair form with the comet's position for your date. That shape will show you exactly where to look. (The comet is plotted at 12:00 Universal Time on the indicated dates, which is around dawn on the same date in the time zones of the Americas.)

Each morning Comet Pojmanski will rise a little higher and become easier to see, but at the same time it's fading. On February 27th it's only  $5^\circ$  above the horizon at the start of dawn as seen from  $40^\circ$  north latitude, but the comet gains about  $2^\circ$  of altitude per day: to about  $8^\circ$  on March 1st and  $16^\circ$  by March 8th. By then, however, it will be starting to fade rapidly, probably dimming to magnitude 6.2 by March 11th and losing 0.1 magnitude per day thereafter.

If you're south of latitude  $40^\circ$  (approximately the latitude of Denver, New York, and Madrid), the comet will appear higher over the horizon than described above and thus will be easier to see. Seen from farther north, it will be lower and harder.

The comet's orbital elements and an ephemeris are available for entering into sky-mapping software or for plotting on a star atlas. Keep up with its doings at the [Comet Observation Home Page](#) and the [Weekly Information About Bright Comets](#) page.