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Gravitational dance: Leo triplet galaxies in spring

A cosmic gathering in the night sky. Spring evenings bring one of the most rewarding sights for sky watchers and astrophotographers alike: a small group of galaxies known as the Leo Triplet. Tucked within the constellation Leo, this trio provides a remarkable reminder that even in a relatively small patch of sky; entire galaxies can be found interacting across the depths of space.

The Leo Triplet consists of three galaxies: Messier 65, Messier 66, and NGC 3628. They lie about 35 million light-years away in the direction of the constellation Leo, and

through a telescope, they appear grouped closely together in the sky. These galaxies are physically related and bound together by gravity. Each member of the triplet has its own personality.

At the top of the image, we see Messier 65, a classic spiral galaxy with a relatively calm and symmetrical structure. Its tightly wrapped arms suggest a galaxy that has remained somewhat undisturbed compared with its neighbors. Next door is Messier 66 (bottom right), the brightest of the trio and arguably the most active-looking. Its spiral arms appear stretched and uneven, clear evidence that gravitational



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warped its disk and triggered bursts of star formation. The third member, NGC 3628 (bottom left), is also known as the “Hamburger Galaxy,” which we will feature in detail next month. One of its characteristics is the presence of an enormous tidal tail stretching hundreds of thousands of light-years into

space—clear evidence that gravitational forces between the galaxies have pulled streams of stars and gas away from their host.

Although they appear as a simple trio in the sky, the distance between these three galaxies ranges from 180,000 to 600,000 light-years, and they are actually engaged in a slow gravitational dance that has been unfolding for hundreds of millions of years.

– *Dr. Carlos Rotellar is a Bowling Green nephrologist who has had an interest in astrophotography and has been taking images of the universe from his driveway for several years. Website: Skyastrophotos.com*

A 2:47 a.m. alert, a rabbit and 220,000 evacuees as France’s wildfire rages on

By EVA VAN DAM and JOHN LEICESTER
Associated Press

BORDEAUX, France — The mobile phone alert message marked “URGENT” came with a beeeeeeeep in the dead of night. “Evacuate now,” it said.

Suddenly awake, Morgane Bonichot scrambled. She grabbed her 9-year-old daughter, their rabbit and their dog but didn’t think to pack underwear.

The 40-year-old childcare worker found herself swept up in one of the biggest evacuations Europe has seen since World War II, forced with more than 220,000 other people to flee a monster wildfire in southwest France that has consumed an area four times the size of Paris and is defying a massive effort, involving a dozen countries, to bring it under control.

In hindsight, Bonichot thinks maybe she should have seen it coming.

Her daughter was in the blaze’s epicenter when it ignited last week, staying with an uncle in the midst of the pine forests, scrub and farmland being consumed by an inferno so virulent that it has morphed at times into a self-feeding firestorm, spitting lightning bolts that have sparked yet more flames.

Among the fire’s first evacuees, the daughter came home



EVA VAN DAM / AP

An evacuee reads a newspaper report about wildfires in southwest France as he lays on a camp bed at a temporary shelter in Bordeaux, France, July 28, 2026.

Friday. But with the flames spreading closer to her mother’s house west of Bordeaux, the daughter began preparing to flee again.

“She packed a suitcase with a lot of things, telling me, ‘Mum, you need to pack your suitcase because we’re going to have to be evacuated,’” Bonichot said.

Just hours later, at 2:47 a.m., she got the evacuation order for their town, Saint-Jean-d’Illac, on her phone.

“Forest fire underway,” it said.

All told, regional authorities have emptied two dozen towns and villages, some ravaged by fire. Others between the blaze and Bordeaux, including Saint-Jean-d’Illac, were evacuated as a precaution by government

officials who say their priority is making sure that no lives are lost.

After a pause in evacuations Monday, when the fire’s spread stopped, they resumed Tuesday as flames flared again. An additional 4,000 people were moved from camping sites and holiday homes on the blaze’s northern edge, increasing the number of people forced to flee: more than 220,000 in the Gironde region alone. In Spain, historic wildfires have also forced tens of thousands of evacuations, bringing the number displaced in southwest Europe to roughly a third of a million.

“We left just like that,” Bonichot said. “My car had broken down, so neighbors had

to drive me, along with my little girl and the animals. But one of the neighbors had a cat, and with the smell of the rabbit it became very complicated. So she had to drop me off.”

After a few days staying with Bonichot’s mother, they moved again, this time to a huge exhibition center in Bordeaux that city authorities have converted into a temporary shelter. It has camp beds, food, medical and veterinary services, clothes and volunteers doing what they can to make people comfortable.

The rabbit stays in a cage between the mother and daughter’s beds and the dog curls up in a large bowl. After a couple of days in the makeshift conditions, “I’m starting to become really exhausted,” Bonichot said.

But she doesn’t want to go home until she’s sure they won’t be evacuated again.

“I just can’t put my animals through another journey. The only trip they should have to make now is the one back home. Otherwise, for the rabbit, the stress could be fatal.”

“And my dog was dehydrated,” she said. “Here, there’s air conditioning and everything, so for the moment he’s doing a little better.”

Gironde authorities have said evacuees won’t be allowed back until the fire is contained,

See **WILDFIRE**, 9B

The optimist’s guide to the present

The complainers speak in all caps sometimes.

“AMERICA IS FALLING APART,” they often say. “THINGS ARE WORSE NOW THAN EVER BEFORE.”

But just because something was typed in capital letters doesn’t



SEAN DIETRICH

make it true.

Actually, things are not worse than ever before. Less than 100 years ago, in 1933, nearly 30 percent of Americans were unemployed. Over 2 million children abandoned schoolhouses for factory jobs. About 150,000 families were starving, eating weeds and roadside scraps to combat malnutrition.

Whereas today, the unemployment rate is 4 percent. Meanwhile, we’re more educated than ever—federal law mandates free K-12 education for all youth. Also, over 86 percent of households are food secure.

“WHATEVER!” the angry people type while compressing the Shift key. “THIS IS STILL THE WORST PERIOD IN HISTORY.”

Is it? Let’s talk Earth history for a moment. Millions of years ago temperatures were approaching 150 degrees, which is almost as hot as a Porta-John at a bluegrass festival. Earth creatures retreated to polar regions, en masse. They starved, of course.

Mass extinction was the norm. Acid rain burned plants, killed trees, and destroyed animal eyesight. A super-volcano spewed enough lava to cover North America in a layer of lava half a mile deep. Meantime, here comes an asteroid. Whereas today, you have Starbucks.

“OKAY, MAYBE THE WORLD ISN’T LITERALLY FALLING APART. BUT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS DESTROYING OUR WAY OF LIFE.”

This is exactly what they said about machines during the Industrial Revolution, but we survived.

“WHAT’RE YOU TALKING ABOUT? MACHINES HAVE RUINED US! THEY MAKE LIFE SOOO COMPLICATED.”

Complicated?

“YES!”

But machines make your life easier.

“NUH-UH!”

Yes-huh.

“NUH-UH!”

Okay.

Do me a favor. Go to your pantry. Select an item from your shelf. Any item. Go ahead, I’ll wait.

Great. That can of pineapple you’re holding didn’t just land on the shelf by itself. And YOU certainly didn’t pick the pineapple with your own two hands. You were too busy fondling your caps lock key. I’m going to tell you how that pineapple got to your shelf.

“NO. PLEASE DON’T.”

First, tractors somewhere in Hawaii dragged mechanically intelligent implements across the soil, unrolling plastic onto soil beds to control weeds and retain moisture. Pineapples

See **OPTIMIST**, 9B