

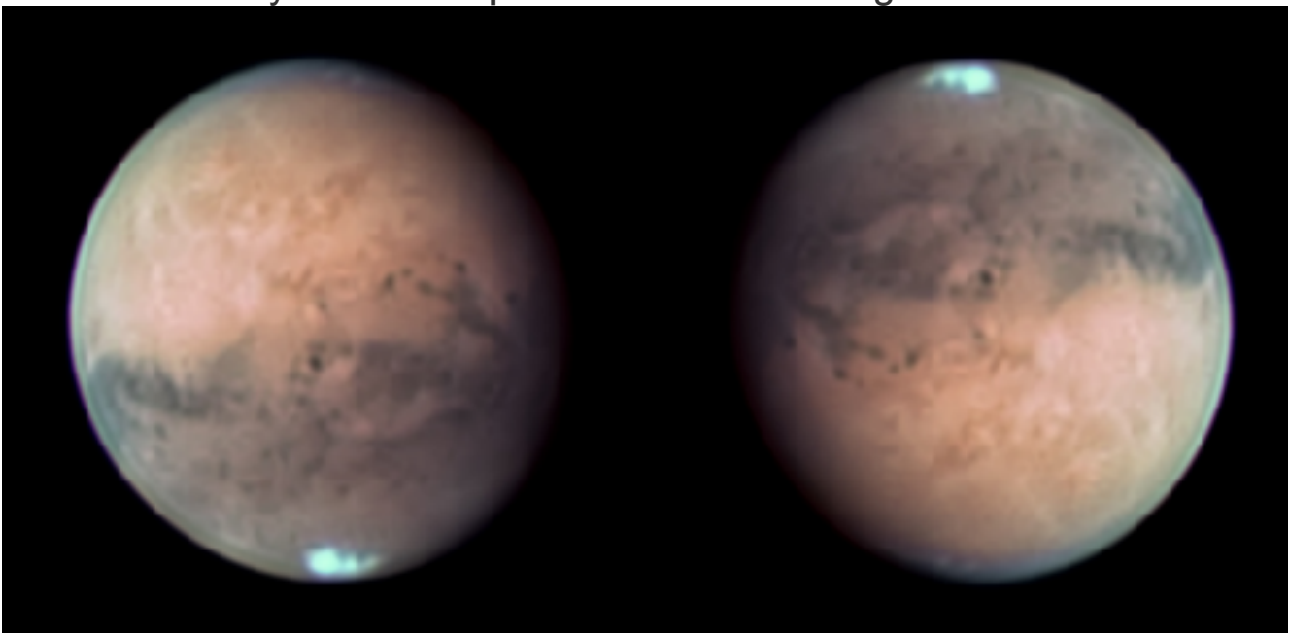
**RETROGRADE MARS:** For months, astronomers have been watching Mars creep eastward among the stars of Pisces. Yesterday, Sept. 9th, Mars reversed course. Now the planet is moving westward.

Astronomers call this "[retrograde motion](#)." It's a sign that Earth and Mars are about to have a close encounter.

The video, above, created by graphic artist [Larry Koehn](#), shows why Mars "goes retrograde." Basically, Earth is lapping Mars in a two-way race around the sun. Our planet is faster, so Mars seems to go backwards during the weeks of closest approach.

On **Oct. 6th**, Earth and Mars will be only 62 million km apart--a small distance by interplanetary standards. In fact, its [one of the finest](#) close encounters in years. Mars will be up all night long, outshining every star in the sky with a piercing burnt-orange hue.

Mars is already a lovely sight. It is now shining almost twice as brightly as Sirius, the brightest star in the sky, and its disk has swollen so large that even backyard telescopes reveal astonishing details:



Amateur astronomer Maximilian Teodorescu of Romania took these pictures on Sept. 7th using a 14-inch telescope. "It is possible to photograph craters on Mars as small as 150 km wide," says Teodorescu. Not bad for "amateur" astronomy.