

Zodiacal Light Zoology

Courtesy of SKY & TELESCOPE

ZOOS AND ZODIACAL light have at least one thing in common. They share the same ancient Greek root “zoion”, meaning animal or living creature. Just as a zoo houses animals, the zodiac is home to eight different beasts, along with three human figures and one inanimate object (Libra, the Scales). Together they illuminate a 16°-wide imaginary band around the sky bisected by the ecliptic — the path traveled by the Sun, Moon, and planets.

The zodiac is also home to an enormous, pancake-shaped interplanetary dust cloud that stretches from the Sun out to approximately 2 astronomical units (just beyond the orbit of Mars). The cloud consists of asteroidal material and dust shed by comets.

Sunlight scattered off the scant material produces the zodiacal light, which is

plainly visible to the eye.

You only need a moonless sky, minimal light pollution, and an unobstructed vista to the east (near the September equinox) or west (near the March equinox).

Since the zodiacal light is centered on the ecliptic, it's best viewed in the Northern Hemisphere from mid-northern latitudes when it

tilts steeply up from the eastern horizon before the start of dawn from September through November mornings, or after dusk in the western sky from March through May evenings.



The Zodiacal Light and the Milky Way

From a truly dark location the zodiacal light towers majestically, making it one of the most compelling astronomical sights you'll ever witness.