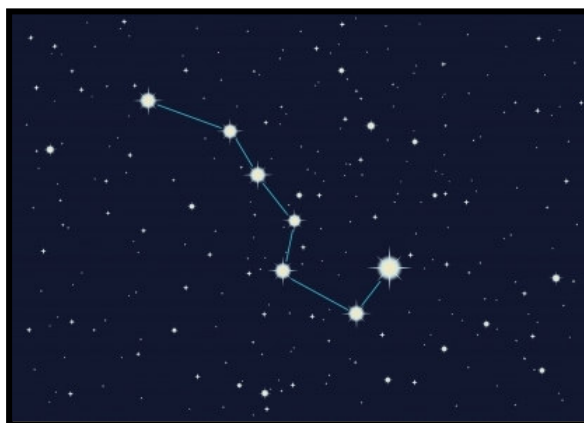


Telescope the Night Sky

Astronomy is a fascinating science to study. What is especially nice about it is that we can all be involved by simply lying down in our yards at night and becoming familiar with the sky. This is a great way to decide if you are really interested in continuing to explore the stars, planets and constellations, *before* purchasing an expensive telescope.

Choose a nice clear night and lay out the blanket. Begin by locating the North Star. Remember it is the last star in the handle of the Little Dipper. Another helpful hint is that the Big Dipper is situated to catch everything that might flow out of the little dipper. In the spring the Big Dipper is south of the Little Dipper, in the summer its west of it. Let's stick with the summer sky since it's the most common and comfortable time for star gazing!

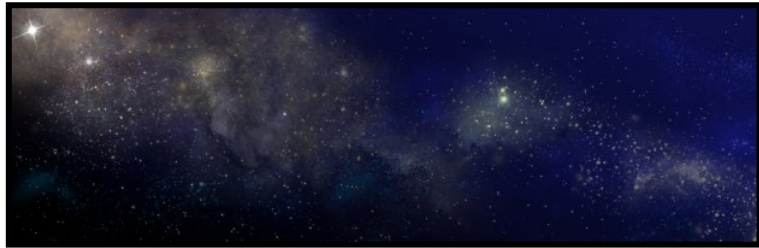


Once you have located the Big and Little Dippers, draw an imaginary line through the two stars on the outside edge of the Big Dipper and the North Star. Continue looking in this direction and you should find the 5 star constellation in the shape of an “M” or “W”. This constellation is called Cassiopeia.

Constellations are just like dot to dot pictures in the sky created by the ancient civilizations. The ancient Greeks and Romans named many of the constellations as the characters in their mythology. You need to keep an open mind and be creative to really see the shapes they represent. For instance, now follow the North Star and the two stars along the edge of the Big Dipper in the opposite direction. The imaginary line will catch the “tail” of the constellation “Leo the Lion”. It is made of four stars that may represent the tail, shoulder, paw and head. It lies close to the horizon in the western sky and looks nothing at all like a lion!!

It's also fun to think about some other phenomenon while gazing at the stars. If you stay out and watch them long enough, you'll notice that they have moved...or have you moved? In any case, the stars are not where they were when you started if you haven't changed positions! Why is this? Did you know that each season of the year you can see different constellations? It is because the earth is orbiting around the sun and revealing different parts of the sky as it moves.

Can you locate the Milky Way? Do you know what it is? Well, it's the galaxy that Earth, is a part of. It looks like a milky, light strip of clouds that creates a stripe across the sky.



Planets are a little trickier to see. They don't twinkle as much as stars and they move across the southern sky in the summer, kind of low. Many times the news station in your area will mention if one of the planets will be visible. You should be able to see Mars, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn with the naked eye.

The moon is also fun to gaze at. You'll see light and dark patches that may seem to create the shape of a man on the moon! The dark areas are considered the "seas", although there isn't any water in them. Lighter areas are mountains and the craters, or hole on the moon from meteoroids hitting it usually can't be seen without binoculars or a telescope.



So the next step in your astronomic journey might be to grab a pair of binoculars and see what other details you can pick up. If this becomes frustrating and you are yearning for more....you might be ready for a telescope!

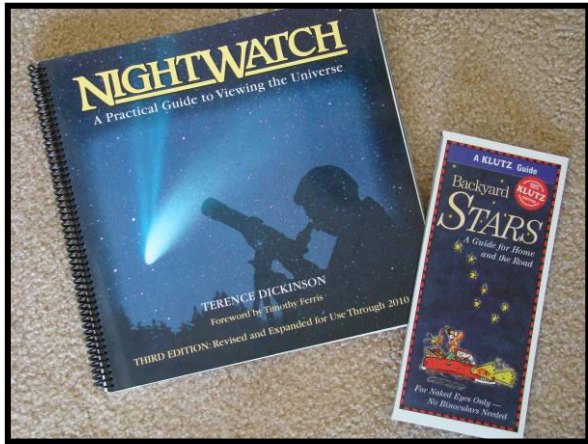
Not too many years ago, I bought my husband a telescope for Christmas. I really didn't know anything about telescopes and I counted on the sales person to give me all the information I needed. Well, he gave me enough information for me to make a somewhat educated purchase and we've been thrilled with it ever since.



I bought a Meade ETX series telescope and tripod. It came with the viewfinder and a 48x magnifying lens. I spent the extra money to purchase a 2x Barlow lens and it's been worth every penny. It basically doubles whatever lens you have. My husband got into it and grabbed another lens which is a 129x magnifying lens so we can really see some details when we gaze at the moon and stars!!

I have to admit we were a little overwhelmed once we opened it on Christmas and started looking at it. Well, since then, Meade has developed a website with instructional videos that are wonderful. They start by telling you to forget reading the instructional manual, just take the telescope outside, remove the lens caps, focus and look at something. You don't have to know everything there is to know about your telescope to start enjoying it. I liked that!!

It just so happened that at the time of year we bought the telescope, Saturn was going to be visible. Well, I'll tell you what, when you look through that tiny eyepiece and see an actual planet with rings around it....you are hooked!



It's a very good idea to purchase a book or at least a star guide that indicates where the stars, constellations and Milky Way are located during each season of the year. I have a KLUTZ Guide called, "Backyard Stars" that is a great starter chart. I also have a book called, "Nightwatch, A Practical Guide to Viewing the

Universe and it is written by Terence Dickinson. There is a section in this book that describes the Earth as "...but a mote of dust in the universe..." Interestingly it describes how it compares to the moon, then to the planets, the sun, our galaxy, other galaxies and then honestly, it shows that outside a certain very small cube of space, or the "present", exists the past because what we are seeing today is perhaps light that has left a Galaxy millions or billions of light years ago. So what we see is actually what is now a long, long time in the past. OK, that's all of that I can handle.

The point is astronomy is fascinating. It is part of the explanation of where we came from. It is a chance to see the past with our naked eyes. It generates questions and topics of discussion and it can be done with the entire family without spending a dime. Now that's an activity worth looking into!

I hope this has inspired you to give star gazing a try. If you never get to the telescope part of it, no matter, what you gain by feeling a part of the universe in your own back yard is perhaps the better result of the experience anyway!

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