

The Sky this winter

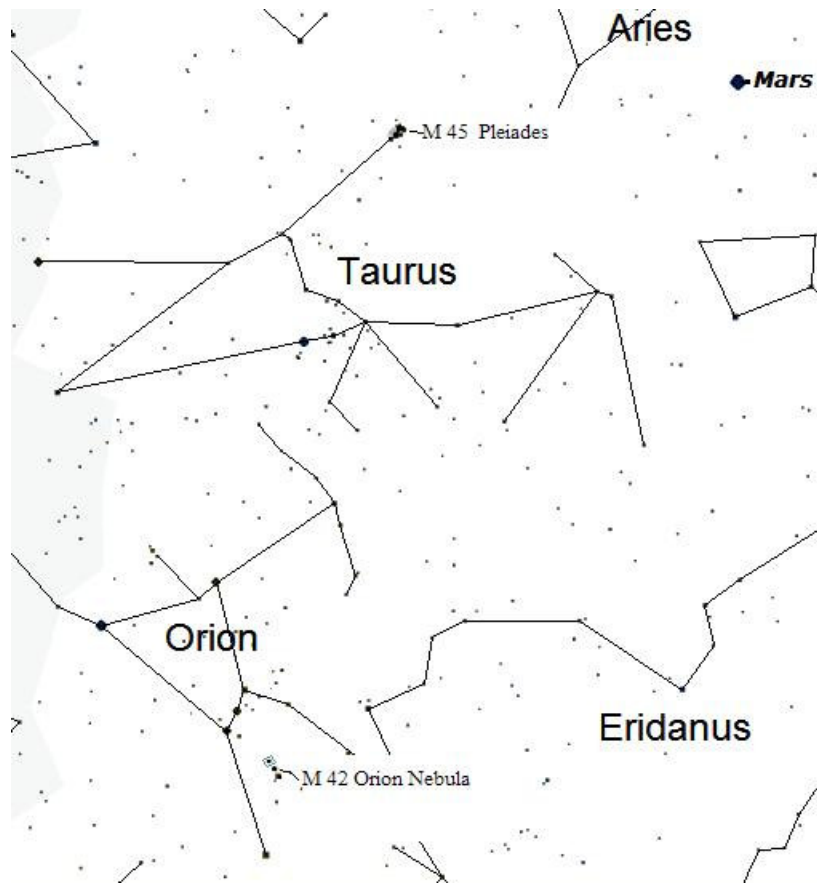
Feeling those winter blues? A lot of us Canucks seem to get bummed out around this time of year. It's dark when we leave for work in the mornings and by the time we return home, the sun has already gone down. However, the short daylight hours have an advantage or two – for us astronomy buffs, at least! Unlike the summer months, the stars in winter become visible at a reasonable hour and one can stargaze any night of the week without sacrificing precious hours of sleep.

There are many interesting night-sky objects that are visible at this time of November. Venus can be spotted low in the southwest at sunset; appearing as a bright, star-like object that disappears below the horizon at around 7:00 PM. Mars can be viewed at the same time above the eastern horizon, and is visible all night. As the Earth rotates, Saturn can also be viewed, rising in the east at 10:30 PM, while Jupiter appears on the scene just as morning breaks, around 7:00 AM. A small telescope or even a pair of binoculars mounted on tripods can be used to reveal the rings around Saturn, or to view Jupiter and its moons.

The open cluster known as the Pleiades (an interesting binocular object) can be found just above the constellation of Taurus at nightfall, around 6:30 PM. Orion, a favourite winter constellation for many, returns to the night sky at around 9:00 PM, and contains the great Orion nebula – a wispy cloud of light that can also be viewed with binoculars. For a challenge, why not try to hunt down the Andromeda Galaxy? Located between the constellations of Cassiopeia and Pegasus, the Andromeda Galaxy can be spotted under dark skies and appears as a faint, cloudy patch with binoculars, and is considered to be the furthest deep-space 'object' that can be viewed with the naked eye. The light from Andromeda travels for what is thought to be more than 2 million light years before it reaches us, and the view of the Andromeda Galaxy with the naked eye is indeed very faint, and not discernable to everyone. For seeking out deep space objects, a dark, moonless night in an area unaffected by light pollutions is recommended.

There are also a couple of meteor showers this time of year: the Leonids which recently finished (peaking November 17th), and the Geminids, which are active from December 6th to the 13th, peaking on the night of December 13th. This year, both the Leonids and the Geminids peak(ed) under the light of the full moon, making it not the best of years for viewing these showers. However for those interested, one can often spot the odd bright meteor that makes the effort worthwhile.

So if the short daylight hours are getting you down, why not take advantage of the long nights and get re-acquainted with the night sky? All you really need to do is to throw on some warm clothes and take a few minutes to let your eyes get adjusted to the darkness. Once you come to recognize their patterns, the winter constellations that re-appear at this time of year will seem like old friends that have been away for a long trip. A partial sky map is included for some of the constellations described here. For a full sky chart (available free of charge online), check out <http://www.skymaps.com> and follow the link to the evening sky map.



Caption. This partial sky chart can be used after 9:00 PM, facing the eastern horizon. Image courtesy Starry Night Backyard.

By Trevor Helwig for the Sun Times

Trevor Helwig is a member of the Lethbridge Astronomy Society, which holds a monthly public observing session at 7:30 PM on the last Saturday of the month (from September to April) at the Oldman River Observatory at Popson Park. See <http://www.lethbridgeastronomysociety.ca> for more details.