

05 - A Star in the East - December 2012

A Star in the East

The sky to the east this month is reminiscent of the Christmas story of the three wise men, when they told Herod “we saw his star when it came up in the east.”

At Christmas time we too can enjoy a wonderful collection of bright stars and constellations to the east and north-east, this year with dazzling Jupiter thrown in as a bonus. It is a glorious panorama stretching over 60 degrees, visible from any backyard with a view north and east. Why go outside after the sky darkens and enjoy this feast of heavenly objects. A real Christmas present.

Starting at NNE, you will see the lovely open cluster called the Pleiades, looking like a very small upside-down saucepan. Also known as the Seven Sisters, this is part of the constellation Taurus, the Bull.

Just 10 degrees east of Pleiades you'll find a brilliantly bright yellowish 'star', which is really the planet Jupiter, shining at magnitude -2.8 and a mere 619 million km away.

Sitting directly above Jupiter, like an inverted 'V' is the lovely cluster Hyades, which represents the face of the bull. The bright orange star at the V's bottom right is Aldebaran, an orange giant star which represents the bull's eye.

Moving another 25 degrees east of Jupiter you see a bright red star. That's the red supergiant Betelgeuse in Orion, the Hunter. And immediately above it is Orion's belt with three blazing white stars. They also form the base of the famous Saucepan, with its handle containing the stunning Orion Nebula at top right. Above them is Rigel, a blue-white supergiant.

Then to cap it off, 20 degrees east of the Saucepan is the brightest star in the sky, Sirius. What a wonderful sky to explore with naked eye, binoculars or small telescope.

Enjoy, and a Merry Christmas.