

06 - The Seven Sisters - January 2013

The Seven Sisters, one of the most beautiful and famous star clusters, is viewable from January to February in our Northern sky. The Pleiades - the Seven Sisters - is so prominent that it pops up in the legends and folklore of nearly every culture in the world, back to remote antiquity.

If you go out around 9 pm and look North about 30 degrees above the horizon you'll see a beautiful collection of stars resembling a small saucepan with handle (up-side-down) or even a baseball cap. They cover an area of sky about 2 to 3 Moon diameters.

The naked eye can see from six to nine stars in the group. The ancients used it as an eye chart. If you could see seven stars, you had 20-20 vision.

The Greeks named the seven main stars after the nymph daughters of Atlas and Pleione. The two stars at the tip of the handle are the proud parents themselves. Greek mythology says that Atlas asked Zeus to protect his daughters from the amorous attentions of Orion. Zeus did this by turning them into white doves and placing them in the sky, out of Orion's reach. He also placed the bull, Taurus, between the sisters and Orion as a protective shield.

References to these stars abound.

To quote Tennyson from 'Locksley Hall':

*"Many a night I saw the Pleiads,
rising thro' the mellow shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fireflies,
Tangled in a silver braid."*

In the Old Testament, Amos chapter 5, verse 8, we read *"...Him that made the stars, the Pleiades and Orion..."*

Australian Aboriginals have a number of stories about Pleiades. In one the stars are Ngamma Gama, the seven sisters who are chased by the hunter through the bush to try and catch a wife.

To be different, the Japanese describe them as Suburu, meaning 'a string of jewels' They appear in stylised form on that car's badge. In fact, jewels are as common a description as sisters, a 13th century Persian poet Sadi describing *"...necklaces of Pleiades seemed to hang upon the branches of the trees..."*

The Pleiades is actually a cluster of about 200 stars (revealed in binoculars and telescopes) and are all about 360 light years away. They are mostly 'new born' giant blue-white stars, less than 50 million years old. That is, they are very young, very large, and very hot. But, after all, they are nymphs.