

They're all up there

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

When I started writing this column eight-and-a-half years ago, my intention was to simplify the concept of astronomy and give the readers an opportunity to get to know just what is out there.

As such I am always on the look-out for any information that would help accomplish that task.

This past week I found something in one of the many e-mails I receive each day on astronomical ideas and events that could help accomplish that goal.

It is a newsletter titled, "The One-Minute Astronomer," by Canadian astronomer Dr. Brian Ventrudo. If you would like to follow his information you can sign up for e-mail notices at www.oneminuteastronomer.com

A cold winter night is not very conducive for wanting to spend time outside doing things astronomical, so here is his list of seven things that are not difficult to locate, and will be of interest to many, especially children.

First up, one of the brightest objects in the early evening sky right now, the planet Jupiter.

Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system. It is a gas giant meaning it is made of gas, not solid material like Earth, Mars, or Venus.

Go outside about an hour after local sunset and look east almost overhead. It won't be difficult to locate, it is the brightest thing in that direction. It is currently just above the "V" shape of our old friend Taurus, the Bull.

When I showed my three-year old granddaughter the recent conjunction of Jupiter and the moon she tried to say Jupiter, but it came out more like "pujiter," then "putijer." She did get the pronunciation correct and happily pointed out "Jupiter" to her mother when she came out of the house later.

Since we are in the area, number two on the list is the Hyades star cluster, which is that "V" shape we just saw when locating Jupiter.

Many call this "V" the face of the bull. I prefer to think of it as the horns of the critter. The bright star located just below Jupiter and the Hyades is Aldebaran.

It is not a part of the cluster, it just happens to be located in the same direction as the Hyades, in fact, it is located about half way to the cluster and only looks like it belongs there.

If you want a really outstanding view, use a pair of binoculars to look at the Hyades; the "V" will fit nicely inside the field of view, it is a spectacular sight.

Right now there is something else of interest near Jupiter and the Hyades, one of the minor planets (former asteroid) Vesta. If you put Aldebaran at the bottom center of the field of view, Vesta will be at about the ten o'clock position almost to the other edge of the view.

Since we are in the area, the third object of interest is another small, compact, star cluster, the Pleiades, which will also look great in binoculars.

Located above the Hyades, and Jupiter, the Pleiades are a small group of stars called “The Seven Sisters.” From a dark-sky place six can be seen easily with just your eyes, in binoculars all seven are easily seen. Incidentally, the Hyades from mythology are also sisters.

SKY WATCH: Third quarter moon, Sunday, Feb. 3. Saturday, Feb. 2, is the traditional Groundhog Day which has something to do with a rodent seeing—or not seeing—its shadow which is supposed to say something about the further length of winter. Well, just so you will know, Feb. 2, is a cross-quarter day, which means it is about halfway between the winter solstice and the vernal, or spring, equinox. So basically it makes no difference what that rodent sees, winter is half over.

NEXT WEEK: The next two more quick-view objects, and more astronomical blathering. Also, the comets are coming.