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December's night sky: a total lunar eclipse approaches

Rich Heffern | Dec. 16, 2010 Eco Catholic

December stars seem twice as brilliant as those of summer. The sky is doubly clear; the dust of summer is washed out of the atmosphere. The Big Dipper, which is actually not a constellation but what is called an "asterism," a configuration of stars that look like something, is down on the northern horizon. The Big Dipper is part of the greater constellation called Ursa Major, the Great Bear. Native peoples say its on the horizon now because it has come down to wash its paws in the deep lakes before they completely freeze over.

Ursa Minor, the Little Bear or Little Dipper, hangs by its tail straight down from the North Star, Polaris. Cassiopeia, the Queen, sits high in the sky. Nearby is the Great Square of Pegasus and the constellation Andromeda with its splendid large galaxy, M31, clearly visibile to the naked eye -- and completely mind-blowing to see in binoculars or a telescope. Off toward the west the constellation Cygnus, the Swan, is in flight toward the horizon. It's the eternal migrant. The second most well-known constellation in the sky Orion the Hunter faces the constellation Taurus and the zenith of the sky. Almost overhead are the Pleiades, the magnificent cluster of seven shy sisters who are best seen out of the corner of the eye.

The Moon is approaching fullness. In fact, on the night of Dec. 21 will come a total lunar eclipse that can be seen over most of North America. It will be visible after midnight, Eastern time.

The planet Jupiter shines near the Moon well after dusk. Briefly just after sunset you can see Mercury and Mars only a few degrees apart near the southwestern horizon.

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