

Stars over Sisters

By Amy Hills
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As the snow piles up and the New Year begins, January brings beautiful night skies to Central Oregon.

January is a very special month astronomically for containing the Quadrantids meteor shower, which is the first major meteor shower of the year. Usually active between the end of December and the second week of January, the Quadrantids peak late the night of January 3 and early morning of January 4, with up to 40 meteors per hour at its highest point. The moon at its first quarter will set just before midnight on the third, leaving a dark sky perfect for viewing the shower.

The meteors can be spotted all over the night sky but they appear to originate from the constellation Bootes. The meteor shower is caused by dust grains remaining from an extinct comet called 2003 EH1 when they enter the earth's atmosphere and are incinerated by the heat of friction.

Some of the brightest constellations in the night sky will be Taurus, Orion, Auriga, Ursa Major, and Canis Major. Taurus is a constellation of a mighty bull with the two left-most stars representing the horns. Taurus is just to the right and north of Orion. Orion, an absolutely breathtaking constellation, will be visible at 11 p.m. to 12-midnight high in the southern sky this month. Orion is a constellation of a mighty hunter and can be easily identified by his belt, three closely packed stars that are somewhat easily spotted in the sky.

Ursa Major will also be quite visible this month. Ursa Major, also known as the Big Dipper, is a constellation representing a great bear that contains many deep sky objects. Canis Major is a constellation of a large dog and is right next to Canis Minor, a slightly smaller dog. These two dogs belong to Orion, the great hunter of sky lore. All of these constellations are interconnected in mythology.

The Winter Hexagon is a formation of six very bright stars that create a hexagonal shape in the sky, which is fully visible in winter. It includes Capella in the constellation Auriga, Aldebaran in Taurus, Rigel in Orion, Sirius in Canis Major, Procyon in Canis Minor, and Pollux in the constellation Gemini. A smaller but more regularly shaped formation

is the Winter Triangle, which consists of Procyon, Sirius and Betelgeuse. These two formations will be visible until March.

This month, both Venus and Mercury are at their most visible points. Venus begins the month in Aquarius but moves to Pisces later in the month. Venus reaches its greatest eastern elongation on January 12, which puts it highest above the horizon just after sunset, in the western sky. Mercury reaches its greatest western elongation on January 19, which also puts it highest above the horizon shortly before sunrise in the lower eastern sky.

On January 5 the moon will be at first quarter. January 12 will be a full moon, and January 19 the moon will be at last quarter. There will be a new moon



PHOTO COURTESY NASA

Spiral galaxy M101, often referred to as the Pinwheel Galaxy, is one of the finest deep sky objects in the constellation of Ursa Major.

on January 28, which is an opportune time to observe

galaxies and fainter stars as they will be easier to spot

without the moonlight to obstruct the view.

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