

Heavens above: Exploring the wintertime night sky

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

In spite of the cold, winter is a great time to get outside on a clear night and do some stargazing.

Hint: It helps to pick a night with little or no moonlight.

Of all the constellations

open to the public. Bechtel happens to be the largest planetarium in the state of Washington, and is open both for field trips and to the general public.

Reasonably priced shows are offered at different times; check the website



visible to us this month, Orion the Hunter is the easiest one for me to find. I look for the three stars in a row that form his belt. He's got two feet, one arm holding a club and the other holding a shield so you see the side view of it. Harry Potter fans might be interested to know that one of his shoulder stars is named Bellatrix, and one of the stars in Orion's dog, Canis Major, is called Sirius, the dog star. That's just below and to the west of Orion. You might also be able to find the twins known as Gemini. Look for their heads first, and then the stick figure bodies coming out sideways. Orion and Gemini are among the few constellations that look pretty close to what they are supposed to represent.

February is also a great month to view planets in the night sky. Venus will be at its absolute brightest the night of Feb. 16. The planet entered our night sky in last June and will leave it at the end of March this year. Of course, we can only

see Venus when it is to the side of the sun, not in front of or behind it. At most, we can see it about a quarter illuminated. If you look carefully, you will also be able to see Mars at the same time. Follow the line of stars up Orion's belt and to the far right. Mars will be on the left and Venus on the right. Venus is bigger and brighter.

Let's be honest, for the average person, finding specific constellations and planets can be difficult and frustrating. I recommend using a map that you print off and can literally hold above your head to orient yourself. I also did a quick download of a free app onto my computer called AstroViewer. You can input a date and time, or just click on the 'now' button to see what the sky should look like. You can explore the night sky from the comfort of your couch! Window-s2universe.org gives a great explanation of the constellations and the stories behind them, and offers free printable maps. Don't forget, Pend-

leton and other Umatilla County libraries have Astroscan Telescope kits available for check out, complete with a star and planet locator instruction manual.

For more fun, try downloading one of the International Space Station apps. These apps can alert you when the Space Station is directly overhead, a couple of times a day, and when it's visible tracking across the sky at night. About 250 miles above the earth and the size of a football field, the Space Station is sometimes the third brightest object in the sky, so not too tough to spot. Some of the apps even show you what the Space Station is seeing on the earth.

Now that the entire family is jazzed about space, take the next step. There are two planetariums near Eastern Oregon: The Clise Planetarium at Whitman College in Walla Walla and Bechtel National Planetarium in Tri-Cities at Columbia Community College. Clise is available for field trips, but is not

for show times and age suggestions. For \$10 or less, you can enjoy shows about astronomy, cells, climate, the solar system, a reef, trees, stars, the search for water, Pluto, the sun, volcanoes, and the telescope. One tip: Sit as far up as you can, as the seats don't recline. And a note to planetarium designers: Who builds these with seats that don't recline?

All this astronomy promotion is to get you prepared for a once in a century event that's coming this summer! Look for more on that later this spring.

Let's make 2017 the year we spend time with our families doing super cool science stuff. It's inexpensive, easy, fun, and a really special opportunity that your kids will remember forever.

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