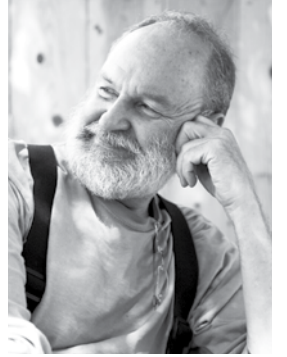


THE STARRY SIDE

Imagine what you like

BY GREELEY WELLS



Greeley Wells

People sometimes ask me how I came to my fascination with the stars. It's a fun answer for me to think about, filled with warm memories. It started with Donna McCutcheon, wonderful grandmother to me and many cousins. She owned a three-mile-long island off Nassau in the Bahamas. For most of my young life, during spring breaks from school we flew south to Nassau (I'm east coast born and raised) and sailed off on a 30-some-foot schooner five miles or so to Mrs. McCutcheon's island.

Often after dinner Donna would gather all the children who were visiting, take us out to the veranda or down to a beach, spread us out, and tell stories. She showed us constellations, weaving tales and descriptions that totally enthralled me.

I was hooked. Since then, I have never been able to *not* look up at the night sky if there is any chance to see it. I often make special trips out under the stars to see some event or meteor shower, bright planet or the space station going by. I just can't help myself and I'm glad of it. It's been a fond interest and, more than that, a real love of mine.

The beauty, the science, the history, our connection to mankind's past and to the solar system and universe—all of it simply amazes me. The more I learn, the more I love it all. And I'm so glad this column affords me the opportunity to pass some of this on to you the way Donna McCutcheon did for me on a little island in the Bahamas long ago. Thank you for reading, and giving me that opportunity.

Once again the winter panorama unfolds for us. Put on those warm clothes and boots, grab a visorless hat and maybe a blanket and a chair to lean back in. Then get comfortable, and just look up. It's so simple and rewarding.

You'll probably see Orion with his belt of three stars, his sword hanging at an angle below that. Two bright stars above are his shoulders, and a little triangle—a bit hard to see—is his head. His right arm is raised, with a club in it. His left arm holds a curved shield defending him from Taurus the bull (that distinctive V shape called Hyades, which is inside the larger constellation of Taurus along with Aldebaran, the bright star). This is all not far off to our upper right. Below Orion's belt I see his two legs in a sort of running position.

Orion, look for the brightest star in the sky: Sirius, the heart of Orion's faithful dog. To its lower-left is a medium-sized triangle—that's the dog's hind quarters. I see his back leg and tail, but not much more. The rest is up to our imaginations.

And that brings up an important concept for me. We get to see the sky any way we want to. It's actually hard to see what someone else might be seeing and describing. So in the end, it's all bets off: see what you want. History and older civilizations have taught us what they see, and it's fun to start there. But it's free territory—see and enjoy and imagine anything you like!

Other events of note

- Geminid Meteors are usually great in winter, but this year the full moon on December 14 will be there to ruin the best part of them. It's not likely you'll see much.
- Venus is in the sunset for all three winter months, bright and beautiful.
- Mercury plays low in the sunset, illusive and hard to see.
- Mars is moving east and stays approximately in the same position in the southwest, moving slowly to the south as the stars and winter months go by.
- Saturn has set behind the sun and is invisible to us.
- Jupiter is the only planet in the sunrise. That's Spica below Jupiter. They both work their way higher, rising earlier as the winter months go by.

Here's to clear, dark, night skies and bright stars to spark your imagination this winter!

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Illustration: Guy Ottewell's Astronomical Calendar 2016.



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