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SCIENCE



Star cluster will mark start of Hawaiian year



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Eye on the Sky

It might not be January yet, but it is the new year this month, the Hawaiian new year, that is. Known as Makahiki, the Hawaiian new year begins when the first visible crescent of the waxing moon is seen after the star cluster Makali'i

(Pleiades) rises at sunset. This celestial event takes place annually in November or December, this year on Nov. 18.

CONSTELLATION SPOTLIGHT

Makali'i means the "little eyes," an appropriate moniker for this cluster of bright stars. Although there are more than 1,000 stars in this cluster, it is dominated by about six or seven bright ones visible to the unaided eye. The ability to see seven stars in this cluster was used as a test of good eyesight in old Hawaii. In modern astronomy this same group of stars is identified as M45, also called the Pleiades. According to Greek mythology, the Pleiades are seven sisters who were placed in the sky by Zeus, after they pleaded with him to help them escape the unwanted advances of the hunter Orion. The Japanese call these stars Subaru. The next time you see a Subaru car, look for this star cluster shining prominently in the logo.

The Pleiades can be seen in the night sky throughout November. Early in the month, they rise in the east just before 7 p.m. and are visible until dawn. By the end of the month, the Pleiades will already be above the horizon by sunset. Look for a bright cluster in the constellation Taurus, not far from Orion's belt.

If you are interested in learning more about the Hawaiian new year, native Hawaiian astronomer Paul Coleman will speak about "Makahiki in Old Hawaii" at Windward Community College on Nov. 18 from 12:30 to 1:15 p.m. For more information, e-mail nancyali@hawaii.edu.

LEONID METEOR SHOWER

Meteor experts expect this year's Leonid shower to be a wonderful show. Meteor showers occur when Earth moves through debris from a nearby comet. This month, Earth will pass near the center of the debris stream from Comet Tempel-Tuttle, likely increasing the frequency of visible meteors. The peak night of this meteor shower is Nov. 16-17. Fortunately, it is also new moon on this night, which means that there will be no natural interfering light. The meteors will appear to radiate from the constellation Leo the lion, which rises in the east after midnight. For best viewing, head out in the hours before dawn on Nov. 17 and look east.

PLANETARY HIGHLIGHT

On the evening of Nov. 23, look for a beautiful conjunction of the near-half moon and the bright planet Jupiter. Visible after sunset, the moon chases Jupiter across the southern sky until the duo set by midnight.

Nancy Alima Ali manages the Hokulani Imaginarium at Windward Community College. E-mail your comments or questions to nancyali@hawaii.edu. For a schedule of Imaginarium offerings, visit aerospace.wcc.hawaii.edu/imaginarium.html.

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