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The Big Dipper constellation – also known as the Big Bear or Ursa Major.

Astronomy not new to Anishinaabe

By Ray St. Louis

Have you ever looked up at the sky on a clear and dark night? Has your imagination ever been swept away by the mystery and grandeur of the celestial wonders overhead? If you answered “no” to either of these questions, you are missing out on one of the Creator’s greatest gifts and one of science’s greatest frontiers.

As the sun sets earlier at night and rises later in the morning and winter starts to creep up on us, opportunities to gaze upon the vast beauty of the universe increases. What’s great about star gazing is that you really don’t need any equipment to enjoy the stars, planets, constellations, and our magnificent moon. This is the way I started out; simply looking up at the stars and wondering how far it all goes and if there are others out there looking back and wondering the same thing. The sky can be an overwhelming sight, but do not let the vastness of space intimidate you. You must remember to start small. Almost everyone I know can point out the Big Dipper (aka The Great Bear). This can be used to guide you to other wonders above.

There is an ancient Iroquois legend about the Big Dipper. The popular constellation, known to them at the time as The Great Bear, involves three young Iroquois men and a massive bear. This bear (the four main stars of the Dipper) was so massive that he could hunt the bountiful rivers of the stars for sustenance, especially for the long winter that was coming. For the entire spring, the bear would feast amongst the stars until he was full and content.

Unbeknownst to the bear, he was being followed by three young Anishinaabe (the three stars in the handle of the Dipper) all spring. These brave men wanted the bear for his pelt and meat. This would provide food and warmth for their families for the long winter that was predicted. They hunted the Great Bear diligently all summer long and finally they caught up to him in the autumn. With their bows and arrows they penetrated the Great Bear’s flesh, killing him. His blood spilled down from the sky and painted all of the leaves red and orange. The trees admired the Great Bear and regarded him as a loyal friend; so, as a symbol of respect and mourning, they dropped their blood-tainted leaves to the ground. Every spring, the Great Bear is reborn and the three Anishinaabe men hunt him again and again.

As many Anishinaabe teachings are orally passed, there are even fewer about the cosmos; however, the sky is an extremely important part of our lives. Our sun is the very source of life on this planet and our moon is a way to measure time (the passing of full moons), when to travel (via tidal regions and using Polaris-the North Star), and when to harvest.

Astronomy doesn’t have to always be scientific. Simply gazing upon the wonders of our limitless night sky can prove to be very relaxing, very exciting, and absolutely inspiring. The winter months may be cold but they offer us longer nights so that we may enjoy and respect these cosmic gifts.

If you would like to learn more, check out the North Bay Astronomy Club (NBAC) at www.gate-way-to-the-universe.org, or www.skynews.ca/pages/clubs_list.html

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