FINDING THE FABLED UNICORN

The unicorn sits in the southern sky, sitting between other great constellations such as Orion, slightly to the East, and Gemini to the North as well as Canis Major to the South. This places it in great company in our evening skies. The constellation of Monoceros, (the real name for the unicorn) is a rather new find, being first discovered in the 17th century by a Dutch cartographer named Petrus Plancius.

Monoceros is a fairly dim constellation, but if you start out by searching out its brighter neighbours, it will make it easier to find. To help out you can also locate the star Procyon that sits to the North.

Although there is only one Messier credited with making the Unicorn home, it also contains a good number of NGC objects that are visible with a backyard telescope. M 50 is an open cluster that was discovered sometime before 1711 by Cassini, and again by Charles Messier in 1772. The cluster sits about 3,000 light years away, so it is a fairly close object in astronomical terms and has often been described as having a heart shaped appearance when viewed.

Although not sitting in the Unicorn, Messier object 48 another open cluster makes its home in the nearby constellation of Hydra. This cluster is estimated to be about 300 million years old, and is actually a naked eye object, visible on a clear night in good skies. M 48 was thought to be discovered by Charles Messier in 1771, however according to his calculations, there is not an open cluster there. The credit for the discovery often goes to Caroline Herschel the sister of Sir William Herschel in 1783, a number of years later.

There are three other great objects well worth hunting in the area, one being the Rosette Nebula sitting about 4900 light years away. The Rosette is a huge diffuse nebula, that is so large that has four NGC numbers associated with it, NGC 2237, 2238, 2239 and 2246. Another one is the Christmas Tree Cluster, 2400 light years away, named due to its resemblance to of course a Christmas Tree when it is viewed, as well as the Cone Nebula. The Cone Nebula or NGC

2264 is also a great viewing target in the same area. These three will take a clear night and a fairly good backyard telescope to see, but are surely worth the effort.

As I stated before our meeting venue and day has changed. We will be meeting on the second Tues of each month instead of Wed, and the gathering will be at the theater at CFB North Bay, and we are all enjoying the change. The facility is a terrific venue, and the staffs very accommodating. Please check our website for meeting information and new location, our May meeting will be on Tues the 13th and is a great time to come out. Remember that we have our first Star Party of the year happening at Mew Lake Provincial Park on May 1, 2 and 3rd this is usually a great venue with terrific clear skies and excellent viewing. Check our website for information and for booking. If you have a group or just a family get together, why not email and enquire about having members of our club give your guests a great night of viewing as part of your entertainment. Check our website for more information, or email me or any of the other executive members of the club. Our website address has changed slightly as the site has been updated and the hyphens are not needed, so simply copy and paste to get to our new site and please feel free to forward comments/ideas/suggestions on what you would like to see there. http://www.gatewaytotheuniverse.org/ my email is astronomer123@cogeco.ca I look forward to seeing you in April at our new venue. Clear skies and good viewing!!

Bill Montague