

Star Guide: Cosmic scavenger hunt

By Tony Berendsen

The Milky Way in August as seen from the North Shore of Lake Tahoe is spectacular to behold on a moonless evening. Breaching as a gigantic silvery whale our galaxy's shape towers across the sky through the constellation of Cassiopeia and at the South Shore it's heart is exposed near the constellation of Sagittarius, the galactic center.

To gaze upon our galaxy with the naked eye conjures thoughts of the immensity of the cosmos. To explore its star fields and dust lanes with binoculars is a visual adventure where discovery meets imagination and beckons the realization of our smallness.

A fun way to explore our galaxy's neighborhood is with a cosmic scavenger hunt. Here is list of items: Swan, Harp, Dolphin, Arrow, Eagle, and Coat Hanger. The best way to find all of these is to head out under the starry sky about 9pm and find the summer triangle stars, Vega, Deneb, and Altair.

You will find the Swan near Deneb, the Eagle near Altair, and the Harp by Vega.

The dolphin (Delphinus) is a little more difficult to find since its stars aren't as bright as the summer triangle, so grab a star gazing app like SkyPortal and ask it to point the way.

Next try for the Arrow (Sagitta), which is closer to the center of the Milky Way band within the Summer Triangle; an app can help with this too.



Within the summer Milky Way the bright star Vega in the upper left and Altair the lower right. Photo/Ryan Berendsen

Last, the most difficult item: The Coat Hanger (Brocchi's Cluster). It's a little asterism shaped like an upside-down coat hanger that is just off the side of Sagitta and below the star Albireo in the Swan. Binoculars will help you find the six stars that form the bar of the hanger, and the another four forming the hook. It's upside down position in our northern latitude prompts some people to call it the Ski Lift.

Interestingly, the Coat Hanger has been known for more than 1,000 years for its distinctive shape and grouping of relatively bright stars within the Milky Way. It was once thought to have been a galactic cluster (stars bound in gravitational association), but recent measurements by astronomers have determined the stars are just a chance alignment making them look like they are close to one another from our viewpoint.

The reclassification of the Coat Hanger from a cluster to an

asterism is just one example of our evolving understanding of our view in to space.

A cosmic scavenger hunt is not your usual hunt because once you have found all these items you don't really have them in possession as proof you have found them. But you now know where they are and can return to them on any dark cloudless night of the summer. It may be there will be other hunts in your future? There are plenty of items like the Coat Hanger, not easy to find, but rewarding just the same, helping you find your way around the galaxy.

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