

DISCOVERING THE WONDERS OF THE NIGHT SKY

Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. No one would sleep that night, of course. (From a speech by Paul Hawken)

Astronomy is one of the oldest sciences. Teachers and parents are encouraged to take advantage of the educational opportunities that the night environment has to offer – without having to go further than the school grounds or your own backyard! At School children learn about, sunrise and sunset, about the moon, planets, stars and galaxies, so why not experience these first hand – at night?

Night has a unique beauty and mystery all of its own. Sounds are different, colours disappear and silhouettes appear. As our vision adjusts to the darkness and our fears recede and our senses of hearing and smell are heightened. Night time is a special time for quietness - a sharing time of muffled voices and shuffling feet as friends, holding hands, guide each other through the dark. Together we broaden our perceptions and recapture feelings of awe and wonder.

There are many activities which can be done at night, but for now we will concentrate on the dome of stars above our heads. Winter, when the atmosphere is dry, is the best time to discover the wonders of the night sky, to search for the Southern Cross with its colourful Jewel Box and the Scorpion with its red heart star, to look out for satellites and perhaps spot a comet. After that you will be encouraged to learn more and become familiar with names such as Antares, Betelgeuse and Bellatrix, Spica and Sagittarius and, of course, Omega Centauri, the names I have used for my two pet cats!

The main constellations (star pictures and patterns) can be spotted with the unaided eye. We will use binoculars to find deep sky objects such as galaxies, open clusters and ball-shaped globular clusters. Through a telescope we will enjoy the spectacular rings of Saturn. In between we will lie on the ground, wrapped warmly in duvets and blankets, and simply be amazed by the mysteries of the universe.

Learning Through Nature will begin night sky activities on Wednesday the 15th June when we will gather to enjoy the stunning lunar eclipse followed by weekly night sky activities. After the enthusiastic response to these activities in 2010 we have located a larger venue. Watch the press for details and join us to learn more about the stars, galaxies, constellations, planets and satellites.

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