

Eye on the Sky – April 2010

By Nancy Alima Ali

Constellation Spotlight: Gemini

If you have been following along with this monthly column, you should be able to identify the constellations of Orion, Taurus and Leo. This month's highlighted constellation is Gemini, the Twins. Gemini can be found to the north of Orion, in between Taurus and Leo. Gemini is visible throughout April in the evening sky. Look for the bright twin stars Castor and Pollux high in the western sky after sunset, then watch them slide towards the horizon as the evening progresses.

In Greek mythology, Castor and Pollux were identical twin brothers with a unique difference: Pollux was immortal while Castor was a regular human. This odd situation came about because their mother had already conceived Castor with her mortal husband when the god Zeus impregnated her with the immortal Pollux. The twins had many adventures together including one that ended in Castor's death. Devastated at the loss of his brother, Pollux begged Zeus to make him mortal. Zeus allowed the twins to be together forever as stars in the sky.

In Hawaiian, these stars are sometimes called Nā-māhoe, meaning "the twins". The stars Castor and Pollux are used in Hawaiian celestial navigation and are part of the "Canoe Bailer of Makali'i" star line.

The Gemini North Observatory, located on top of Mauna Kea on the Big Island, is named after the Gemini constellation. Gemini North has a twin telescope, Gemini South Observatory, located in Chile. Both are 8-meter optical/infrared telescopes that can collectively observe the entire sky. The part of the sky that is not visible from Hawaii can be seen in Chile, and vice versa.

Visions of Venus

Venus blazes in the evening sky throughout April. At an apparent magnitude of -3.91 , Venus is brighter than any natural object in the sky other than the sun and moon. Look towards the west after sunset and you can't miss this beautiful planet. Venus and Mercury can be seen close together at the beginning of the month. After April 10, Mercury moves steadily towards the horizon and then disappears from view. Try to observe the thin crescent of the waxing moon in between Mercury and Venus just after sunset on April 15. The next night the moon pops higher in the sky, only about four degrees away from Venus. On April 24, enjoy the sight of the Pleiades in conjunction with Venus.

Lyrid Meteor Shower

Early risers may enjoy observing this year's Lyrid meteor shower since the peak occurs before dawn on the morning of April 22. Meteors may also be visible late on the night of April 21, but the waxing gibbous moon will provide some light pollution

until it sets at 1:47 a.m. The Lyrids typically aren't one of the year's best meteor displays but a careful observer may see as many as 20 meteors an hour during the peak time.

GOT QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Please email nancyali@hawaii.edu or call 808-236-9169.

The Hokulani Imaginarium at Windward Community College offers shows and special events for the public. For a schedule of Imaginarium offerings, visit <http://aerospace.wcc.hawaii.edu/imaginarium.html>.