

Star Attractions Column – January 9, 2010

Cosmic Mike®, North Museum of Natural History and Science

Eating onions with six wives

When it comes to constellations, a few mythological stories are forever etched in my mind. The winter night sky brings out one such story.

Several years ago, I was introduced to a Native American story associated with the Pleiades, the star cluster also known as the Seven Sisters. Most constellations and other stellar objects have numerous stories describing their origin. These legends vary depending on the culture from which they originated.

One Native American tribe, the Western Mono tribe, from central California, that observed the Pleiades didn't visualize seven sisters. Instead they saw six wives who loved to eat onions. (Even this story has different versions.)

These wives truly loved onions. They loved eating them so much, they had them for breakfast, lunch, dinner and even as a midnight snack.

In addition, the onions they ate were wild onions! Can you imagine the wives' breath after eating all those onions? If you are like me, you wouldn't want to be near them.

The wives' husbands felt the same way. The men loved their wives, but after a while their onion breath was too much to bear.

The husbands went to the chief of their tribe and explained the situation. They asked him, Could he please place their wives in the night sky?

The chief gave it some thought and eventually agreed to the husbands' request. To this day the six wives are visible in the winter night sky, still eating onions.

Where are they, you ask?

By 6 p.m. EST the six wives are already high in the sky. They're located in the east-southeast, almost fifty degrees above the horizon. That's five fist-widths stacked on top of each other with your arm stretched out.

The Pleiades, or wives, are visible to the unaided eye and actually appear as a small cluster of stars. Some stargazers have claimed to see seven stars with the naked eye. But with the amount of light pollution today, we're lucky to see five or six.

For additional assistance in locating the wives, start with Orion the Hunter, located about a fist-width above the horizon or just above the treetops. Many people find the hunter by looking for the three stars in a row that form his belt.

Draw an imaginary line up through the belt stars. It will point you near a really bright star called Aldebaran, the eye of Taurus the Bull. The constellation Taurus appears as a letter "V" on its side.

Extending that line past Aldebaran brings you near the six wives who love to eat onions.

Getting back to the story, the husbands began to miss their wives, as any good spouse would, but not their onion breath. The husbands were very lonely.

After several days, the husbands went back to the chief. They asked him if they could be placed in the sky near their wives—but not too close.

The chief gave this some thought and eventually agreed. Today, the six husbands also occupy the winter sky near their wives. To find them, look in the vicinity of Aldebaran. If you can see a group of stars that resembles a small letter "v," including Aldebaran, you've found the husbands. They're also known as the Hyades star cluster, living happily ever after.

So on the next clear night, look up in the east-southeast and see if you can find the mighty Taurus the Bull and the Pleiades and Hyades star clusters. And the next time you eat onions, may you think about the six wives. I'm sure they would be thrilled if you shared some with them.

Until next time, this is Cosmic Mike wishing you an astronomical day.

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