

Our Night Sky for the week of August 20

Last week I helped you find the constellation Perseus. You looked high in the eastern sky to the large W, then down from there to the stick man Perseus. Now continue down from there and you will see the jewel box, the Pleiades.

If you do nothing else this summer with your binoculars, take a look at the Pleiades, also known as the Seven Sisters. This tight grouping of hot blue stars, on a good night with good eyesight you should be able to see seven stars, I've read that it was once an eye test for the Roman legions. It is what is called an open cluster. The cluster is almost 450 ly from us and a tight cluster like this makes it interesting to scientists because of the variety of stars and the tidal interactions between them. This grouping had many uses throughout antiquity partly because it was so distinct and easy to identify.

The other objects I've suggested rotate closer around the north star and are above the horizon all year long. The Pleiades are not circumpolar, you can see it in August but later in the evening. When you see the Pleiades in the evening sky, Orion is rising and starting to move into the evening sky, a sign that winter isn't far behind.