The April Night Sky

The nights are getting longer and cooler now we have passed the autumn equinox (March 21).

High in the north we can see 3 bright stars in a line. These stars make up the belt of Orion, also known to us as Tautoru. From NZ the line of 3 makes the bottom of 'The Pot', now tipped on its side. This is Orion, a constellation also called the hunter. In the Pot's handle, or Orion's Sword, is the massive Orion Nebula, a glowing cloud easily seen in binoculars. This is the closest region to us where stars are forming.

Extending the line of the belt stars upward and to the right you will find Takurua **Sirius**, the brightest star in the night sky. It is northwest of overhead at dusk and sets in the southwest after midnight. Sirius is the head of the constellation Canis Major the big dog. Below Sirius are bluish Puanga **Rigel** and orange Pūtara **Betelgeuse**, the brightest stars in the constellation Orion.

Extend the line down and left from Tautoru and you will find the orange star, Taumatakuku **Aldebaran**, the brightest star in the constellation Taurus. Continue that line further and you will find the Pleiades star cluster, known to us in Aotearoa as Matariki.

By mid-April, Matariki is low in the northwest after sunset and is becoming more difficult to see. This year, be sure to watch over Easter weekend and the following days, as dazzling Venus passes just above the cluster.

In the south-eastern sky, Scorpius, also known as Maui’s fishhook, is seen rising around 9pm. Scorpius will become the dominant feature of our evening sky until spring. In Greek mythology, Scorpius chases the constellation of Orion, across the sky, rising in the East as Orion sets in the West. Further south, Crux, Carina and Centaurus are also major features of our autumn and winter skies.

During April, **Canopus** of Carina is overhead in the southwest at dusk. The second brightest star in the night sky, Canopus, or Atutahi, was a key guide star used by the Polynesian voyagers and today it is used to guide interplanetary spacecraft.

Crux (the Southern Cross constellation) is seen in high the south-eastern sky. Below it, and brighter, are Beta and Alpha Centauri**,** often called 'The Pointers'. **Alpha Centauri** or Hakihea the brighter Pointer, is the closest naked-eye star. **Beta Centauri** or Ranginui like most of the stars in Crux, is a blue-giant star. This is a very rich stellar region to explore with binoculars.

So too is the densest region of Te Mangoroa the Milky Way, the galactic centre, brightest in the southeast above Crux. It can be traced to nearly overhead where it fades and becomes very faint in the northwest, right of Orion. The Milky Way is our edgewise view of the Galaxy, the pancake of billions of stars we are part of.

Two small galaxies, the Clouds of Magellan, **LMC** and **SMC**, are midway down the southwest sky, easily seen by eye on a dark moonless night.

MERCURY: Not visible this month

VENUS: The ‘evening star’ in the north-western sky sets 90 minutes after the sun. Around April 10th Venus will be found to the left and then pass over Matariki. A crescent Moon is close-by on April 23rd.

MARS: Mars remains quite bright in the north to north-western sky, looking like an orange star.

JUPITER: For much of the month the planet is in the Sun’s glare and lost from view.

SATURN: Saturn is the only naked-eye planet in the dawn sky, rising due east after 2 a.m. It is medium- bright with a cream tint in an empty region of sky. By dawn it is well up the eastern sky. The Moon will be near Saturn on the mornings of the 16th & 17th.