

'Hercules' in the heavens during this month

On July evenings, the constellation of Hercules and its great globular star cluster are found nearly directly overhead, says University of Michigan astronomy Prof. Richard G. Teske.

"The constellation is easily picked out between the bright blue star Vega east of it and the reddish Arcturus on its west," he says.

"From earliest times, this star pattern has been identified with national heroes or gods in the tales of many cultures. In Greek legend, Hercules was the courageous, exceedingly strong son of Zeus whose rowdy exploits included battling the Nemean Lion and establishing the Olympic Games."

Teske describes the giant hero as "seen kneeling upside down, his head to the south and his right foot upon the head of Draco, the dragon which coils halfway around the Pole Star."

Located on the western edge of the constellation, almost halfway from Vega to Arcturus, is the globular star cluster of Hercules — the finest object of its kind in northern skies," he says.

"On a clear, dark night the cluster may sometimes be noticed with the naked eye as a hazy 'star' at the limit of visibility. But with binoculars or a small telescope, it is as easily seen as a rounding, cloudy patch a third the size of the full moon."

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"Photographs of the cluster show a remarkable spectacle, for here is an incredible number of stars grouped together in a spherical ball 70 light-years across. "When looking at snapshots of it, one gets an impression of thousands of night-flying insects gathered around a street lamp."

This object in the Hercules constellation is an altogether different kind of star cluster from the familiar Pleiades and Hyades groupings of late winter skies, says the U-M astronomer. "It is much larger than they are and contains perhaps a half-million stars — many times more than they do."

"Astronomers call such, large populous assemblages 'globular clusters,' and have located over 100 of them that are a part of the galaxy in which our sun resides."

Studies of these huge stellar congregations have shown that they are the oldest objects in nearby space," Says Teske. "Five billion years before our own sun and its planets were born, the stars that make up the Hercules cluster began to shine. This cluster and the others like it in the galaxy have witnessed the birth and death of many generations of stars since their own creation."

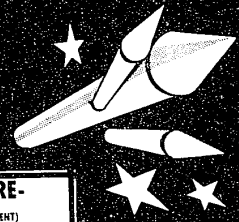
When the Hercules grouping is viewed through a telescope or in photographs, the stars seem to appear tightly packed together. Teske says this is an illusion. "Even near the cluster's very core, the stars are about a light-year apart, and there is little danger of collisions."

What would our night sky be like if we lived on a planet circling a star inside of the Hercules cluster?

"The appearance of the heavens would be a pageant of countless glittering stars, ranging in brilliance from the quarter moon to the brightest stars we see in our own sky today," Teske says. "The bright stars would throw multiple shadows on the ground, and there would be no real darkness at night."

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