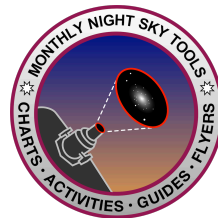




Exploring Two Non-Messier Surprises of Canis Major



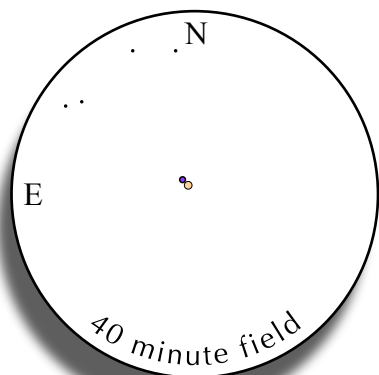
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Early February through mid April is a favorable time of year to explore Canis Major in the early evening. Observe from a dark location with an unobstructed southern horizon.

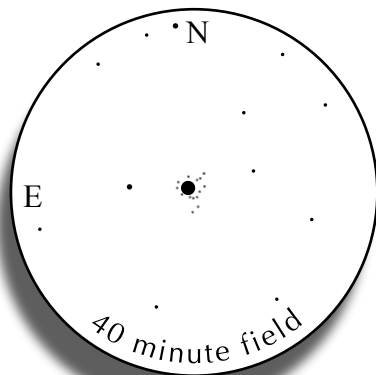
Canis Major is dominated by blazing Sirius, the night sky's brightest star. When most people think of this constellation, they think of Sirius and little else. Amateurs who have recently entered the hobby, after gazing at Sirius' brilliance, move 4° directly south to the large open cluster, M41 – a real showpiece in smaller telescopes. It is bright enough that it can be seen by the unaided eye under dark sky conditions. But Canis Major has a number of other attractions that are frequently missed, with two of them discussed here.

Hop southeast of Sirius down the spine of Canis Major to the three bottom stars, Epsilon, Delta, and Eta. Draw a line from Epsilon through Delta extending for almost that same length. It ends at Tau, a 4th magnitude star that is easily visible from dark locations. Aim the telescope at it using a low power. At first, the star doesn't exhibit anything of note. However, when a magnification of 100 power or more is used, things change. Surrounding the bright Tau, swarm a tight myriad of dim stellar points – the Tau Canis Majoris Cluster or NGC 2362, or Caldwell 64. This 5000 light-year distant cluster proves the point that the more you look, the more you see. A worthy surprise, indeed!

One of the most dramatic double stars in the sky is not particularly well known – even among experienced observers. Many amateurs admire the beauty of blue and gold Albireo shining at the southern tip of Cygnus in the summer and fall sky. Canis Major holds a double of similar appearance, but not quite as bright. h3945, catalogued in the 1800s by John Herschel, lies north of the Tau Canis Majoris Cluster about 1-1/2 low power eyepiece fields of view. Steadily held, sharply focused binoculars begin to reveal its true nature. At 50 power, two lights are easily seen, one blue, the other gold. Another surprise, and it is a beautiful one!



h3945



NGC 2362

