

ENJOY A STAR FILLED NIGHT SKY

Western Desert Association

Cooler fall and winter evenings provide a great chance to get outside and enjoy the star filled night sky. While the glow of light pollution is evident east of White Tank Mountain the night sky over the Tonopah desert has a dark richness that is increasingly rare. Plus stargazing is fun and easy.

Pick a cool evening; lay out a blanket or lawn chair; turn off house and yard lights, then look-up. Turn north and find the Big Dipper from there you can spot Polaris - the North Star. Internet guides can help you spot the seasonal changes in star positions, the planets, and our moon cycles.

Once you recognize the Big Dipper you have a starting point for finding constellations like the W shaped Cassiopeia. In metropolitan Phoenix only a few hundred stars can be seen. But across the western desert stars abound and on a moonless night the Milky Way can be easily seen stretching across the dark sky.

Next go dig out a set of binoculars - any binoculars. Now look up again and be surprised by millions of stars! Double stars, globular star clusters, or cloud like nebula are visible with low power binoculars like 7x35 or 8x40 models. A '3 dimensional' binocular view of smaller areas will let you easily see the distinctive stars that make up the 'Seven Sisters' also known as the Pleiades.

Stars and planets change through the seasons and are easy to see when the moon is not visible. However for a couple weeks each month the moon is visible. The moon's monthly cycles are displayed by the terminator (a line between light and darkness) that outlines craters, mountains, valleys, and fissures. A full moon is very bright. So using binoculars before and after 'full' will provide a more detailed view of the moon's surface.

The Tucson based International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) has worked for over 20 years on lighting systems that put light where it is needed, are more energy efficient, and protect the night sky worldwide. More recently, IDA helped develop a Sky Quality Meter (SQM) that measures the 'darkness' of night skies. A review of Harquahala Peak and Saddle Mountain with a SQM showed that this region still enjoys a high-rated, natural, dark, night sky important to wildlife and stargazers!