

Chippewa Valley Astronomy Update October 2025



Photo caption: The Pleiades star cluster is nicknamed “The Seven Sisters” and is now rising in the evenings. This astrophoto shows not only the six or seven stars easily visible to the naked eye, it also reveals glowing gas energized by the hottest stars.

Photo credit: Todd Chevrier, a member of the Chippewa Valley Astronomical Society.

Women in the Night Sky by Kevin Litten

The International Astronomical Union recognizes 88 constellations, of those eleven are men and three are women. Some, like Aquarius the water bearer, or Auriga the charioteer, or Indus “The Indian”, could be either sex. The default assumes they are male. Coma Berenices or Bernice’s hair is neither a person or a mythological beast, it is somebody’s hair.

Cassiopeia, the queen is the most famous of the female constellations, because she is the queen. Andromeda is next. She is the princess. The final one is Virgo, the un-named maiden. Virgo is one of the 12 Zodiacal constellations matching up with the sun yearly. Virgo is hardly insignificant, yet, no name.

I heard that Gen Z has been trying to rename Orion, a wonderfully prominent Winter constellation, into Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman does have a name and she is a part of our Western mythology. It might work. Wonder Woman © is copyrighted as part of the DC Comics Universe. All things are possible?

Near the future Wonder Woman constellation is a group of women. The Pleiades is a star cluster, not a constellation or an asterism, but a loose group of many stars, a cluster. We refer to them as the Seven Sisters. With sharp eyes and a good dark night you may see more than seven stars. Most people see fewer. Using his telescope, Galileo counted 36 stars in the cluster. With today’s telescopes we are able to image over 1000 stars.

In Western mythology the Seven Sisters have names: Sterope, Merope, Electra, Maia, Taygete, Celaeno, and Alcyone. They are daughters of Atlas. Their mother was Pleione. Their half sisters are in a nearby cluster known as the Hyades. The Hyades were women yet also nymphs so not entirely human. The Hyades Cluster is not nearly as nice to look at as the Pleiades Cluster.

All of Earth's civilizations saw and named the Pleiades Cluster in their own way. There is artwork on cave walls dating to prehistoric times depicting the Pleiades. The Celts, the Mayans, the ancient Hawaiians, the Aztecs, the Sumerians, the Kiowa, and the Cherokee all saw and noted the Pleiades. If you were going to be a famous ancient civilization you had better have seen the Pleiades.

Seven Sisters, three women, some gal's hair, and a comic book character – not many women in the night sky yet they are all worth looking for.

--Kevin Litten is a member of the Chippewa Valley Astronomical Society