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Night Sky of the Flint Hills

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Night Sky of the Flint Hills

While enjoying the Flint Hills during the day, it is the vast openness that first strikes the observer. There is literally nothing for miles and miles. But when the sun goes down, one experiences something that is awe-inspiring.



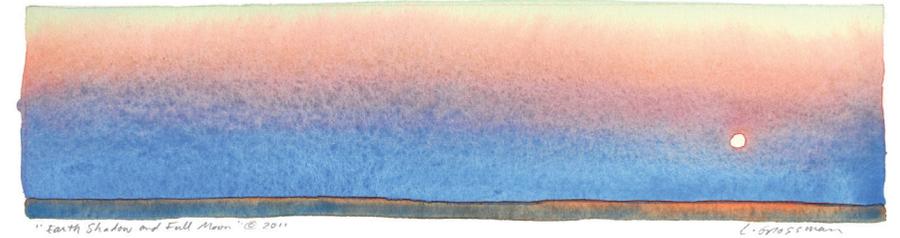
As the darkness settles in, the openness is dwarfed by the darkest, clearest sky only imagined in dreams. Nothing but stars can be seen. The constellations seen as a few stars in the city become hundreds of stars, sometimes making them hard to distinguish. The Big Dipper is low on the north horizon and above it are all the stars of the Little Dipper including the North Star, Polaris. Continue upward and there is Cassiopeia and Andromeda. The Andromeda Galaxy is bright enough to see without the aid of a telescope. Use a telescope and the view is unbelievable.

The first trip of the New Year to the Flint Hills finds the temperatures cold and the skies extremely crisp. Look to the sky and see

the constellation Orion “the Hunter,” home of the Great Nebula of Orion, one of the brightest nebulae in the sky and the famous Horse Head Nebula, a dark region of dust in the shape of a horse’s head set against a beautiful pink reflection nebula. The Pleiades or the Seven Sisters, a small cluster of young stars still nestled in parts of the gas nebula that formed them, are visible.

In the spring, come to the night sky of the Flint Hills and look for the 110 Messier objects. This is a list of objects that range from clusters of stars to galaxies and nebulae which can be seen with binoculars. Start at sunset and observe the sky until the sun comes up.

Summertime brings waiting until later in the evening to see the stars, but then the



EARTH SHADOW AND FULL MOON
Lisa Grossman

Milky Way is visible and it is worth the wait. The center of the Milky Way galaxy is located in the direction of Sagittarius containing more notable deep sky objects than any other constellation. An astonishing fifteen Messier objects can be found here, including the Omega Nebula, the Lagoon Nebula, and the Trifid Nebula. There are also seven globular clusters and four open star clusters. Simply pointing a good pair of binoculars in this direction will reveal a treasure trove of amazing sights. Two additional Messier objects can be found in Lyra, including the famous Ring Nebula, a rainbow-colored shell of gas illuminated by a central white star.

Fall brings cooler weather again and earlier sunsets. Constellations visible include Andromeda, the Princess of Ethiopia,

Cassiopeia, Queen of Ethiopia, and Pisces, the fish. Andromeda is the home of the spiral Andromeda Galaxy, the largest and brightest galaxy in the night sky and close to the Milky Way. Astronomers believe that the Milky Way galaxy is very similar in shape and structure to the Andromeda galaxy. Cassiopeia contains two notable open star clusters and a beautiful face-on spiral galaxy that can be found nestled within the constellation of Pisces.

Whatever the season, the night sky of the Flint Hills is truly an amazing sight to see.

Fred Gassert lives in west Wichita and is a past president of the Kansas Astronomical Observers. His love of camping with family and friends stimulated his interest in astronomy, and he shares that knowledge as a Girl Scout leader and guide.