

Caithness Skies

The Milky Way – Our Galaxy Viewed from Caithness Dark Skies (Dec '07)

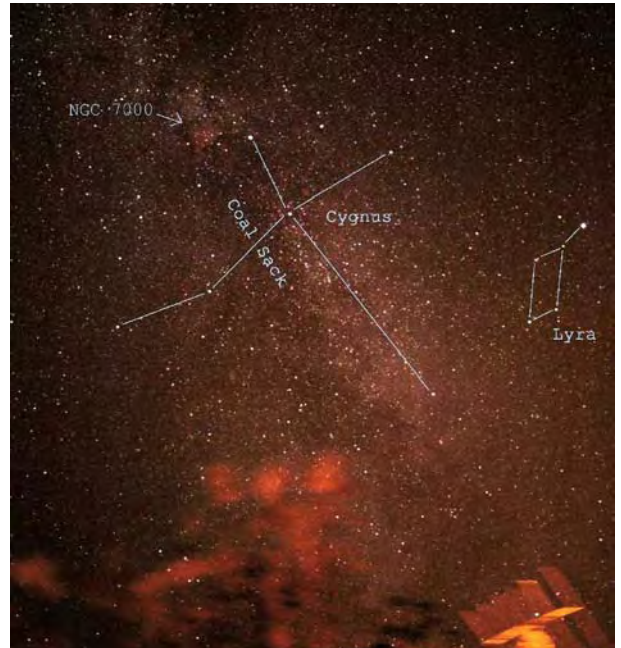
For much of the Earth's northern hemisphere late summer gives the best opportunity to view the galaxy we're located in – the Milky Way. Unfortunately from the northern latitudes of Caithness, the brightest part of the Milky Way is only just above the horizon where haze often spoils the view. We also have the problem of the sky not darkening sufficiently during summer nights to allow for good viewing.

We should not be too disheartened though as the [dark winter skies of the North of Scotland](#), which are something of a rarity in [Europe](#), permit good views of other parts of the [Milky Way](#) during the autumn and early winter. From a dark location at this time of year, it can be seen stretching overhead across the sky from east to west shortly after darkness falls.

To get the best view, pick a clear moonless night and a dark location where artificial light can't affect your eyes. Ideally give your eyes 10-15 minutes to [adapt](#) to the darkness and you'll be amazed how clearly you can see this bright band of sky produced by millions of the stars within our galaxy.

Spend a little time viewing along its length and if the night is particularly clear see if you can pick out some of the dark patches such as the “[Coal Sack](#)” in Cygnus. This is a classic example where interstellar dust has blocked out light from distant stars making this area of sky visibly darker than adjacent areas.

So if the conditions permit why not take the opportunity to enjoy possibly the best naked eye view of [our galaxy](#) from anywhere in Europe.



*The Milky Way in the constellation of Cygnus
(long exposure photo using film SLR camera and wide angle lens)*



*View of the Milky Way passing through Perseus & Cassiopeia
(located overhead mid evening during December)*

Other Events/ Objects of Interest

Geminid Meteor Shower

This [meteor shower](#) peaks mid December with the nights of the 13th/14th and 14th/15th being the best time to [observe](#) with up to 100 meteors per hour being possible. This year the Moon does not interfere with the view, so if the clouds keeps away wrap up warm, find a dark viewing site and enjoy the what could be the best show of the year.



Perseid Meteor flies by Cassiopeia

Comets Holmes and Tuttle

After the [surprise brightening of Comet Holmes](#) during October, the comet remains clearly visible in binoculars as a large bright patch of sky.

Joining it during December is the [comet 8P/Tuttle](#) which will move from near the Pole Star towards the southern horizon as the month passes. It should be clearly visible in binoculars at the end of the month once the full moon has passed.



*Binocular View of Comet Holmes
(bottom left)*

The Red Planet Returns

December 2007 sees [Mars](#) at its closest to Earth since 2005. Even so, being at a distance of 55 million miles its apparent size in the night sky is small meaning that a sizeable telescope will be needed to make out any [detail on the planets surface](#).

One unusual event suitable for anyone wanting to practice for an early rise on Christmas morning happens early on Christmas Eve. At around 0315hrs on the 24th December Mars will briefly disappear behind the full moon. This event is only visible in the UK from the far north of Scotland. After this event you could direct your gaze to view two other planets (Venus and Saturn) that currently shine brightly in the early morning sky.



*Telescopic View
of Mars
(Oct '07)*

If the above has wet your appetite then why not have a look at some of the [many other sights](#) that can be seen in the night sky at this time of year.

G Mackie

29th November 2007