

The Night of the Two "37s"

Sam Storch

Crisp autumn and winter nights invite mind-wanderings under the sparkling stars of Orion, Auriga, and the rest of the "hosts of the long nights." This is a good time for interesting little "projects" that don't require spending the entire night outdoors yet reward the observer with some lasting benefit. Here's one I always enjoy, a little project that will surely invite some rambling and wandering- and that's always fun!

Let's look for the first of tonight's two "37" objects. The glorious pentagon of Auriga contains three splashy open star clusters that are an easy "find," even in steadily held binoculars. In the autumn, find Auriga and note brilliant Capella near the "top" of the pentagon. Now, the "baseline" of the pentagon has Theta Aurigae to the "left" and brighter El Nath (actually part of Taurus, the northern horn of the bull) to the right. With your binoculars or the finder of your telescope, "bisect" that line and you will see the three softly glowing star clusters, named M-36, M-37, and M-38. Each is similar, yet each is different. Which is M-37, and how IS it different from the others?

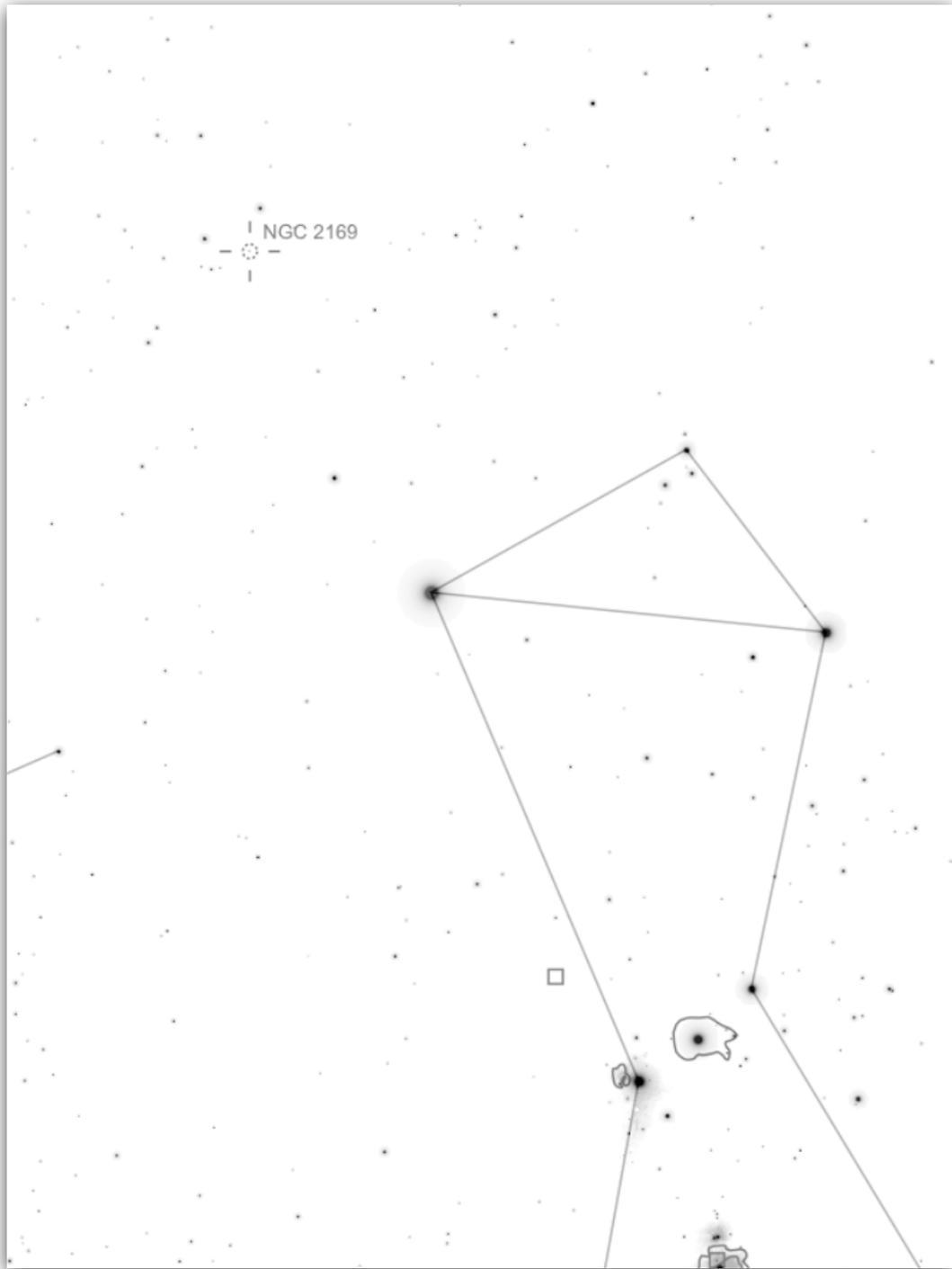
Your first "37" conquered, notes taken, and a satisfied smile on your face, turn now to Orion, rising from the east. Starting at ruddy Betelgeuse, trace with binoculars or finder scope up and out along the "uplifted club.". This part of Orion is made of pairs of stars, a pattern similar to how Andromeda is visualized on the sky. You will need to use your star map or atlas to identify Xi and Nu Orionis; just between them and a little "down," you should find a little cluster of stars marked NGC-2169, and THAT is your target!

As a little boy growing up in a house which had been built just before 1900, I noticed that a small, numbered metal tack or nail had been banged into the window frame of each and every window. You had to open the window high and while cleaning out the inevitable dirt that collected, you'd see that each window had a different raised number on it. These numbers told my father which of the giant wooden-framed screens fit that window for summer protection from insects, and each nail had a sort of ornate, curvy style of numerals.

Why do I write of this little "distraction?" The little cluster that you found in Orion's club has a startling resemblance to the number "37," written out in starlight for you to enjoy. The first time I saw NGC-2169, I burst out laughing- it was THAT perfect a "37!"

Make sure to show this to somebody else- you will get a kick out of the "WOW!" that is sure to come!

First, here is a finder chart for NGC-2169.



Next, here is a screen shot of NGC-2169 from Sky Voyager software on my iPad.

