M50: AN OPEN CLUSTER

During this month start by finding what is called the Winter Triangle. This asterism is formed by three of the brighter stars of the winter sky. One of the other stars is Procyon that represents a dog, the beloved pet of Helen of Troy. At 0 magnitude, it's in fair competition with the other trio members: dazzling Sirius and mighty Betelgeuse about whom we have already talked on previous numbers of the newsletter.

The three stars almost draw an equilateral triangle in the southern sky at the beginning of the night in most Europe though in very high northern latitudes Sirius might not be seen.

Nebulas and clusters near the Winter Triangle. Image done with Stellarium. (Click on the image to see a bigger image)

This month we challenge you to picture M50. Open cluster Messier 50 (M50, NGC 2323) is a pretty and considerably bright object located in a rich part of stars and nebulae in constellation Monoceros, near its border to Canis Major. The best way to find it with binoculars is to track along the line that goes from

Sirius to Procyon and it will appear at about a little bit more than one third of the path.

Messier 50 Star Cluster
Credit: SEDS
(Click on the image to see a bigger image)

Open cluster M50 is about 3,200 light years away from us. Its angular diameter is of about 15'x20' that considering that distance corresponds to a linear extension of about 20 light-years, the central dense part being only about 10' or 10 light-years in diameter. Its population was estimated as about 200 stars in the main body.

This cluster was discovered by Charles Messier, on April 5, 1772, but many people think that G.D. Cassini had already discovered it in 1711, according to a note in *Elements of Astronomy* a book written by his son, Jacques Cassini, in 1742.

This is an intermediate level project to consider this month. If you make any pictures of the cluster send them to us and we will publish them with due credit.

Links:
M50-SEDS
Wikipedia - M50