

# Star Guide: Tahoe pines block the light of stars



Summer is a great time of year to explore the cosmos.  
Photo/Ryan Berendsen

**By Tony Berendsen**

In early June with the last gasp of spring anticipating summer at Lake Tahoe a hazy band begins to show near the eastern horizon in the early evening. At first its presence is only noticed by veteran star gazers, but by the arrival of mid-summer, the glorious milky path of our galaxy is undeniable and stretches from the southern horizon across the zenith to Cassiopeia in the northern night sky.

The immensity of the view of our galaxy fills the heart and mind with the amazing wonder of the cosmos. To see it for the first time is as breathtaking as the next time. To comprehend its grandeur perplexes our perception of our existence. Carl

Sagan once said, "We are a way for the cosmos to know its self ... we are star stuff." When gazing at the Milky Way on a summer night at Lake Tahoe you are seeing the visual proof of his statement with your very eyes.

The Milky Way is a huge collection of gas, dust, planets, and stars. It is a stellar birthplace and graveyard, so large it would take a spaceship 100,000 years at light speed to travel from end to end. One galactic day, the amount of time it takes to spin once on its axis, is 250 million years.

If we were to travel in a spaceship to its center from the planet Earth, we would head toward the stars of the constellation Sagittarius just above the southern horizon, pass by them, and continue for another 25,000 years.

As mind boggling as wrapping your head around the view of our galaxy's hazy band is for us, so is the fact that all the single stars we see – every one of them – is within the Milky Way. They are still incredibly distant, but close enough for our eyes see them a single points of light.

The closest star to the sun is a mere 4.25 light years away. In miles, that's a distance of 25 trillion miles, so distant that there is no disk to see, only a small thin stream of photons.

I've always been fascinated by the blinking on and off of the single stars as seen while walking through the trees of Tahoe at night. Imagine, thin little pine needles blocking the light a star.

I wrote a poem the morning after a Star Tour at Northstar a few years ago remembering how the stars disappeared and reappeared during my walk among the pine trees. For star gazers the trees of Tahoe can be annoyance, blocking the view of stars, galaxies, moon, and planets, but they stand to demonstrate the immense distances to the stars.

## **Elders**

*I have from time to time*

*Walked amongst the pine*

*Not by warmth of Sol*

*But of lights of old*

*Those twinkling points up there*

*I see them every year*

*Like elders overlooking*

*And, yes I know how we are*

*To put in groups*

*Lay boundaries as to say*

*They may wander, ever stray*

*But we have seen them*

*Yes we have*

*Wander very far indeed*

*And still they seem to stay*

*I wonder if they play*

*A game we'll never see*

*For a hundred lives of ours*

*Will barely catch a million miles*

*So I let them out of bounds*

*While I walk amongst the pine*

*And call them by their single names*

*Sometimes I play an elders' game*

*I'll block their sight with a single limb*

*And let them see when I move again.*

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