

# First-hand look at the stars

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When you're learning about the stars, a textbook is nice, but an isolated observatory is even better.

Ten Grade 9 students from Champion Community School visited the Big Sky Observatory (BSO) at Twin Valley Dam. on Jan. 30.

Clear skies and chinook winds welcomed the science class, which came out with teacher Nathan Jackson, who wanted to complete a day class lesson on planets, stars and space.

The group arrived at about 7:30 p.m., by which point it was dark enough to start the hands on lesson.

James Durbano, Big Sky Astronomical Society president, and Neel Roberts vice-president, were both present to assist with the lesson and the use of the telescopes.

Students learned, among many other things, about stars that appear red. Betelgeuse and Aldebaran are such stars, and the reason they're noticeably red is because they are both red super-giant stars — a stage that many stars go through towards the end of their life cycle. At this stage in its life cycle, a star swells up like a big red balloon and its diameter increases by a factor of several hundred, which results in nearby planets getting gobbled up.

"If you were to put Betelgeuse where the Sun is, then all of us, here on Earth, would be engulfed by the star," Durbano told the science class.

The students also learned about



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**An impressed Shelby Davey, 14, spots Venus through the main telescope at the Big Sky Observatory Jan. 30.**

certain constellations like Orion, Ursa Major, Taurus, and Cassiopeia. Among the objects pointed out to the class were Polaris, or the North Star, the Milky Way Galaxy, Sirius — the brightest star in the night sky — and the double stars Mizar and Alcor.

Big Sky's telescopes were used to spot the moon, Venus, the Orion Nebula and the Pleiades.

This year marks the International Year of Astronomy, which honours Galileo's 400th anniversary of telescopic observations.

With such a momentous year for stargazers, Big Sky has big plans.

Family Day Solar Observing is among the events Big Sky has lined up for February. It is to take place Feb. 16 at the BSO from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Visitors will be able to safely see the sun by looking through the telescope, which will be equipped with a white light solar filter.

Also lined up for February at the BSO is a showing of comet Lulin. A public viewing event on Feb. 24 from 8:30-10:30 p.m. will offer visitors a chance to catch comet Lulin as it makes its closest approach to Earth.

For more information on Big Sky, visit [www.bigsky.ab.ca](http://www.bigsky.ab.ca).