

> In your opinion, what is the most beautiful object you have ever
> seen during your starwatching session?

My immediate reaction was, "how do I *ever* decide", but after watching the thread for a while, I decided to make two lists, one of stuff that was obvious and easy to see, the other of stuff that was more subtle. I think I have a qualitatively different kind of aesthetic reaction to subtle beauty than to more obvious kinds. What's more, all the "obvious" stuff is guaranteed to draw a "wow!" from newcomers, whereas much of the subtle stuff they may not be able to see at all. I decided to adopt the phrase "during your starwatching session" from the body of the question as a guide to what was allowed -- not all of these things are what most of us call "deep sky objects". And I wish I had had a chance to look at some of the far southern-sky objects that many other posters have mentioned.

Here is my "obvious" list, with comments, in no particular order.

NGC 4565 -- An outstanding edge-on spiral; with modest aperture one can see disc with obscuring dust band, lens, and highly condensed, almost stellar, nucleus.

The Orion Nebula -- An outstanding HII region with much detail in dust, gas, and stars, and with considerable color.

Saturn -- My favorite planet that I can view as a celestial object (Earth might rate it if I could see it from afar), also the first celestial object that I ever saw through a telescope.

The Central Milky Way -- Another outstanding edge-on spiral, whose view is enhanced by the fact that we are inside it; one of my favorite things to do is show people NGC 4565 as it is sinking toward the western horizon on a late spring evening, point out the lens, disc, and dust band, then grab them by the shoulders, spin them around facing the Sagittarius Milky Way, and say, "And there's another one!" Wow.

Luna -- It's nice to see some topography now and then, and the view of our Moon through an amateur-sized telescope shows stuff down to approximately neighborhood size; I could resolve my daily walk to work if it were on the moon and had bright lights at both ends.

The Pleiades -- Dazzling open cluster, with subtle nebulosity.

Space Shuttle Reentry -- I saw Columbia on the way home in July 1996. To a pilot, the difference between her controlled flight, and the trajectory of a meteor or a piece of space debris, was obvious and thrilling. As a kid science fiction fan, I always wanted to see a space ship landing on the Earth. Now I have.

Comet Hyakutake -- The intense nucleus and coma, shining linear inner tail, and swirling outer tail, stretching out half way across the

sky, were enough to make me believe in star dragons.
Mizar and Alcor -- Well-placed most of the year, this bright multiple star gives a hint of the dynamic range in brightness and separation that double stars exhibit.
Omega Centauri -- Even from 37 degrees north, by far the best globular cluster in the sky, bright and easily resolved with modest aperture.

Next, here is my "subtle" list, also with comments, also in no particular order.

The Veil Nebula -- The eastern and western arcs are not especially subtle, but the rich mass of nebulosity between them makes this supernova remnant rewarding to long hard looks in excellent sky.
NGC 5053 -- This faint, low-surface-brightness globular, in the same low-magnification field as brighter M53, provides an interesting comparison of objects of this kind.
Sirius B -- The Pup is not always wide enough to detect, even in great telescopes, but when it is, its subtlety provides a wonderful contrast to the dazzling primary.
Leo I -- Nearby Regulus makes this dwarf galaxy hard to see, and emphasizes the low surface brightness of this class of object.
Gamma-Two Andromeda -- Gamma Andromeda is another wide/narrow multiple star, with an interesting color contrast, in which the narrow pair is difficult or impossible in many amateur telescopes.
The Star Queen -- This dark structure in M16 was made famous by the Hubble photograph in early 1996. Its shape is discernable in largish amateur telescopes, and to my eye, is appropriate for the name.
The Horsehead Nebula -- Also well-named and close to something bright. Too bad it wasn't known to any ancient culture -- this dark nebula deserves a good myth.
K4-8 -- Amid a small telescopic asterism, a little arc of stars in Scutum, this small, moderately faint planetary seems like a charm on a bracelet.
The Zodiacal Band -- If the Milky Way is the Great Sky River, this lane of dust in the ecliptic must be the most dried-up and arid of streams. Perhaps the Counter glow is the spring from which it flows.
NGC 4387 -- This relatively faint member of the Virgo Cluster of Galaxies lies centered in an equilateral triangle whose northern edge is bounded by bright M84 and M86, and whose southern point is NGC 4388. The progression from Messier objects through two levels of increasing faintness always reminds me that there is always more to see, and puts me in mind of the line from the book version of 2001: A Space Odyssey, "It goes on forever -- and it's full of stars."

One particular event of beauty perhaps deserves a category of its own, which I do not quite know how to name:

A Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile Test. On May 14, 1988, observers set up at Fremont Peak State Park, overlooking Monterey Bay, were treated to a view of a missile launch from a submerged submarine, just at dusk. The rising vehicle left the shadow of the world, and the exhaust plume changed from dirty gray to all the colors of sunset, then finally to dazzling white, as it arced along its trajectory. The display of color put me in mind of Bifrost, the Rainbow Bridge of Norse mythology, over which the gods rode at Gotterdammerung, into the last battle, resolutely onward to the end of the world.

We did not know it was a test. For perhaps fifteen seconds, until it became clear that the vehicle was headed down the Pacific Missile Range, not inland, and that there was only one missile, not dozens, that balmy summer evening could indeed have been the Twilight of the Gods.