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BRIGHTEST COMET IN 40 YEARS VISIBLE FROM WA

Comet C/2006 P1 (McNaught) has exceeded astronomer's expectations and has become the brightest comet in over 40 years.

Currently, it is at its closest approach to the Sun and only easily visible for observers in the northern Hemisphere.

"The comet becomes visible to WA observers from around the 15th of January", said Dr James Biggs, Director of Perth Observatory" but we don't get to see its true brightness because it's close to the Sun and obscured by twilight."

"The predictions are that it will fade fast so we only have about a week to easily observe it, and, we should remember that comet brightness is notoriously difficult to predict", cautions Dr Biggs.

"It should be easy to locate", said Dr Biggs, "find a vantage point with an unobstructed view and look low on the horizon near where the Sun has set, in the direction west of southwest, around 9pm.

Binoculars will provide a much better view - especially of the comet tail reported by Northern Hemisphere observers.

However, given the comet's proximity to the Sun a reminder is in order - NEVER LOOK AT THE SUN with the unaided eye or through an optical instrument.

Comet C/2006 P1 (McNaught) was discovered by astronomer Rob McNaught at Siding Spring Observatory, NSW, in August 2006.

Its orbit is very elongated, and is inclined nearly perpendicular to the plane of the Solar System.

Like most Solar System objects this comet orbits around the Sun, and at its closest approach to the Sun (26 million km) travels at around 100 km/second.

On its passage around the Sun a large cloud of dust grows around the 10km-wide comet nucleus and sunlight reflected from this cloud makes the comet visible.

Comets have a composition similar to a dirty snowball, and dust is flung off its outer surface as the ice is heated (by the Sun's radiation) directly to water vapour.

Comet C/2006 P1 (McNaught) is about 20 per cent brighter than 1975's Comet C/1975 V1 (West) and 12 times brighter than 1995's Comet C/1995 O1 (Hale-Bopp), but still 25 times fainter than 1965's Comet C/1965 S1 (Ikeya-Seki).

For more information contact:

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Sky Chart attached.

