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## Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by **Brian Mitchell**

### Comet Holmes

It was a dark, still, but very clear night last October 27. About 2:00 AM I awakened suddenly. There was no apparent cause and, though I felt quite wide awake, I didn't feel like getting up. Through the skylight overhead I saw a pattern of bright stars in a vaguely familiar constellation. Perseus, I thought.

The longer I looked and wondered about the stars I was seeing, the more I became convinced that the constellation was indeed Perseus, but something was different. Was I seeing double or was there another bright star up there beside Mirfak – *alpha Persei* – the brightest star in the constellation?

I quickly determined that my vision was normal, and this made me curious enough to get out of bed for a pair of binoculars. Once back under the warm covers I had another, better look. There *were* two objects where there should have been one, and one of them, still in the same position as before, was not a star. It was bright, compact, but just slightly fuzzy at the edges. I had no idea what I was seeing.

I got out of bed, dressed, and went outside for a clearer and wider view. Yes, it was Perseus and, yes, there was something new beside Mirfak. Whatever it was, it was very bright – much like a galaxy concentrated into a tiny, swirling mass, like a cumulus cloud shining in the dark of night. I wondered what it could be. A comet? There was no tail visible. Was it heading straight for Earth? Straight away from

Earth? ( Which is what I hoped as I came back indoors.)

Once inside I consulted a sky chart. Yes, the constellation was Perseus; no, there was no object of that brightness near Mirfak. Still curious, I went back to bed and to sleep.

The next morning I called the people at *Sky and Telescope* magazine to describe my experience. They were helpful. They told me that what I had seen was “Comet Holmes”. They said it had already been spotted on October 3, about 25 days earlier. Nevertheless, they congratulated me for my “observing skills.”

They might just as well have complemented me for the location of my skylight or my waking suddenly at the right time. Still, I couldn't help but imagine: if I'd had insomnia on October 2nd that comet would have had a different name.

Watch for more in this column about comets, meteors, and other objects that whiz through the night sky.

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### Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: **How many deer are there on Galiano Island?** Uh, too many? Galiano residents have noted an increasing black-tailed deer population, to the point where it's not only impossible to keep a garden without a fence but also hard for native shrubs and trees to get started anymore. So while we have plenty of mature Garry oak and arbutus, for example, it's rare to find a young one. The deer clip them as soon as they sprout. We don't know how many deer there are here. The provincial Fish and Wildlife Biologists put the number of deer on Galiano at 355, but that number is only a crude estimate based on inventories done elsewhere, and other

estimates suggest there could be as many as 1000+ deer on Galiano. Deer populations are limited by weather, predation, and food supply. Our weather is benign, and the animal predators (wolves and cougars) are gone. We don't know the relative importance of human-related factors – hunters, automobiles, the family dog – on deer mortality here. That leaves food as the limiting factor. Considering all the tasty shrubs and holes in garden fences, we don't know how many deer this island can eventually support.

This month's Natural Mystery: In summer, while fishing about a half mile from shore off Edith Point (Mayne Island), I always see bumblebees heading out over the water in the direction of the distant shore of Point Roberts almost 20 miles away. Many times they will circle the boat a few times before continuing their journey east. Why would Bumblebees travel so far? Is there a special food that makes them undertake such a journey?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to [galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com](mailto:galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com). Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. Visit our website at <http://gulfnet.sd64.bc.ca/GalianoNaturalists.html>.