PICTURE OF THE MONTH

Smiling 'Flipper'

Shapless 2-308 is an amazing looking Wolf–Rayet bubble in Canis Major. It does look remarkably like the head of a dolphin; I fondly remember 'Flipper', a happy and noisy dolphin from the 1960s television programme named for the beast! Jan Scheers opted for an ASA500N telescope and a FLI PL16803 camera, from Telescope Live's remotely-available facilities housed at El Sauce Observatory, Chile, to produce this marvellous portrait. He captured 80 minutes of data from four 600-second Hα and O-III sub-frames to create this Hubble palette bicolour image.

Nik Szymanek says...

Pick up any modern astronomy book and you'll come across fanciful names for deep-sky objects such as the Whirlpool Galaxy or the Pacman Nebula. Some vaguely resemble their names, but an increasing number have gained somewhat fanciful titles, such as the 'Cobra and the Mouse' galaxies and the 'Running Chicken' nebula, and so on. One target that does resemble its nickname of the 'Dolphin' Nebula is Sharpless 2 -308, located in the constellation of Canis Major. Deep images appear to show the head of a dolphin gazing benignly out of a sea of stars with a gentle smile so typical of its namesake cetacean.

This month's winning entry, taken by Jan Scheers, utilised the 50cm f/3.8 CHI-2 telescope located in Chile and part of the Telescope Live remote-imaging platform. This is a bicolour image comprising 40 minutes each using hydrogen-alpha and oxygen-III filters. I suspect this Wolf-Rayet nebula is very weak at sulphur-II wavelengths, so bicolour imaging is a good plan. The more-famous Crescent Nebula (NGC 6888) in Cygnus, also a Wolf-Rayet nebula, is vanishingly faint in sulphur-II.

Bicolour images can be created using several different palettes – the Hubble palette being reserved for three-filter images – but in this lovely image Jan used hydrogen-alpha for red and oxygen-III for both green and blue channels. SH2-308 is much brighter in oxygen-III, so the use of this palette shows the cold light of the filamentary nebula very clearly. The two brightest stars in the image shine with a much warmer tone, the colours of which are accentuated by fine diffraction spikes.

At a declination of –24 degrees, this is a challenging target to image from UK latitudes, visible in the winter sky about eight degrees south of Sirius. For most of us, this places it in the worst of the light pollution and haze.