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Cartography of the heavens

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Astronomers have a new view of our Milky Way, reports Roger Highfield

Spectacular images such as this one of the heart of the Rosette Nebula, a stellar nursery in our own Galaxy, were released today.

The images were taken by a UK-led collaboration of over 50 astronomers, with partners in Europe, USA, Australia, which has compiled the first comprehensive optical digital survey of the Milky Way.



The intense red reveals the concentration of hydrogen

The colour image created by one of the team, Nick Wright of University College London, represents a large cloud of hydrogen situated in the Monoceros constellation of the winter sky at about 5,000 light years from the Earth and measuring 130 light years across.

The intensity of the red reveals the concentration of hydrogen, the most ubiquitous element in the universe, in a region where stars are being born.

The full digital survey of our own Milky Way, made with the Isaac Newton Telescope on La Palma, is described in a paper submitted to the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society and includes some 200 million unique stars, revealing how the more unusual varieties are born, evolve and die.

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This data have been made available to the public using the UK's AstroGrid Virtual Observatory (www.astrogrid.org) - a state of the art software system which makes available all the world's astronomy images via a PC.

The observations show the distribution of glowing hydrogen in the Northern Plane of the Milky Way (the star filled section) and for the first time allows detailed study of large numbers of dying stars like white dwarfs, planetary nebulae and supernovae remnants.

In combination with surveys in the near-infrared, astronomers will be able to construct a complete three-dimensional map of our Galaxy, including, for the first time, accurate

cartography of the interstellar dust.

The reddening and dimming of light that this dust causes has plagued studies of the Milky Way for well over a century.

Dr Eduardo Gonzalez-Solares of the Institute of Astronomy, Cambridge, said the survey provides an unprecedented view of the galaxy. "There has never been a survey at this depth and it will provide new opportunities to study the stellar content of our galaxy."

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