

HEAVENLY NEWS

“Orion, the Hunter”

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These cold, crisp evenings tell us that winter is fast approaching. You could glance at a calendar to see if that's true, or you could look in the evening sky for one of the largest, most conspicuous, and most recognizable constellations in the sky. Named Orion, this constellation is referred to as "The Hunter" in Greek mythology. It represents a hunter with his dogs (marked by Canis Major and Canis Minor) at his heels. In Greek mythology, Orion was the son of Poseidon, the sea god. He was supposedly killed by the sting of a scorpion and his position in the sky is such that he sets as the scorpion (the constellation Scorpius) rises. According to another story, Orion became enamored of a group of nymphs called the Pleiades, depicted by an open star cluster in the adjoining constellation of Taurus. As the Earth turns, Orion seems to chase the Pleiades across the sky.

To locate Orion, first look toward the East for the prominent asterism known as the Belt of Orion, the appearance of three bright stars in a row. Surrounding the belt at roughly similar distances are four bright stars, which represent the outline of the hunter's body. Descending from the 'belt' is a smaller line of three stars (one of which is in fact not a star but the Orion Nebula), known as the hunter's 'sword'.

Once Orion is located, you can use these stars to “star hop” across the sky (family and friends will be impressed when you take them outside after dinner and give them a sky tour.) Starting with Orion's belt, these three stars point to the brightest star in the sky, Sirius (in Canis Major). Sirius marks one corner of a huge triangle (known in the Northern Hemisphere as the Winter Triangle). The other corners are marked by the bright stars Betelgeuse (upper left shoulder in Orion) and Procyon (in Canis Minor).

Another prominent star in Orion is Rigel, the upper right shoulder of Orion. A line from Rigel through Betelgeuse points to Castor and Pollux in the neighboring constellation of Gemini, the Twins. On the other side of Orion is Aldebaran, the brightest star in Taurus the Bull. Beyond Aldebaran, is the Pleiades, an open star cluster. Some people mistake the Pleiades for the Little Dipper, as the six tiny visible stars in the cluster look just like a tiny dipper! Almost directly to the north of Orion lies Capella, the brightest star in Auriga, the Charioteer. To some folks, Auriga looks either like a tent or a kite in the night time sky.

Orion is the winter sky's most famous constellation, and a great place to begin winter star hopping on these cold and clear evenings. To learn more about the constellation Orion and the winter sky, please visit the Community Observatory located behind the El Dorado Center, Folsom Lake College, which is free and open to the public (weather permitting) Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from 7:30 PM – 9:30PM. You can find driving directions and more information about the observatory at www.communityobservatory.com