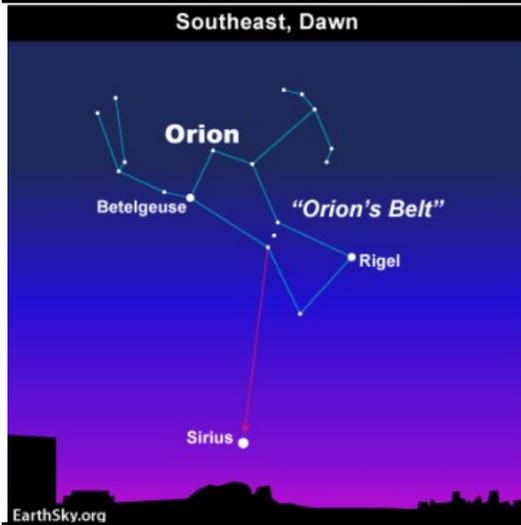


Night Sky 101: Winter Constellations



Orion

Orion is possibly the most well-known constellation, apart from The Big and Little Dipper. Easily recognizable by the three bright stars that form the “belt of Orion,” the constellation is, in reality, much larger. The two brightest stars in Orion are called Betelgeuse and Rigel. Betelgeuse has a distinct red tint, which makes it easy to tell them apart. Betelgeuse may soon go completely supernova. Astronomers suspect that this supernova will not affect the Earth, but may cause a double shadow to be cast on the Earth’s surface for up to two weeks.

Orion is identified as the hunter by the Greeks. According to the myth, Orion was the son of the god Posiedon and Euryale, queen of the Amazons. Orion inherited his mothers talents and became the greatest hunter in the whole world. However, he boasted about this repeatedly, and was killed by a small scorpion (Scorpius), who stung him on the ankle.

Canis Major and Canis Minor

According to Greek mythology, Canis Major and Minor represent Orion’s faithful hunting companions. Canis Major appears to be chasing the rabbit constellation, Lepus, in the night sky.

Canis Major is home to the sky’s brightest star, Sirius, also called “The Dog Star.” Sirius is a blue star, but appears to be many different colors and has been repeatedly mistaken as a UFO. One of the most unique celestial objects in Canis Major is the colliding spiral galaxies, NGC 2207 and IC 2163. The larger galaxy is in the process of pulling stars and remaining material from the smaller galaxy. Canis Minor, the much small constellation, is still easy to see because of its bright, binary star, Procyon. Sirius, from Canis Major, Procyon, from Canis Minor, and Beelgeuse, from Orion, form what is known as The Winter Triangle.



Photo Credit: Stellarium



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The Pleiades (Pronounced PLEE-uh-deez)

Also called “The Seven Sisters,” The Pleiades is a star cluster that is easy to see without any visual enhancement. It is suspected that this cluster has over 3,000 stars, even though only seven are visible with the naked eye. There is a faint nebula surrounding this cluster, known as the Maia Nebula.

The name “Pleiades” comes from Greek Mythology. The Pleiades were the seven daughters of the nymph, Pleione, and the titan, Atlas.

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