

Offered Title: A "Circle" of Jewels

Cold, crisp nights of winter combine with clear dark skies and brilliant starry patterns. Winter skies are a delight! Go out around 9 pm and take a look on a dark, clear night and you will see. What makes our winter sky so breathtaking? You know...Orion, Auriga, Taurus with the Pleiades and Hyades, Gemini, and the dogs. Yes, the dogs, Canis Major and Minor.

It's amazing that an area about 1/5 of the sky has such a concentration of bright stars. This is why winter skies are so naked eye beautiful. Let's take a tour of these bright stars, the "circle" of jewels.

Going clockwise we'll start with Canis Major and Sirius, the brightest star in our naked eye sky.

Low in the southeast Sirius is the big dog stick figure's shoulder. Its head is a triangle of stars and its front paw is Beta Canis Majoris. To the southeast, a few dimmer stars make its back, hind leg/foot and tail. Really, a stick figure dog, or...

Moving northeast, the next bright star is Procyon in Canis Minor, the little dog. I have no idea how it is a dog, but it is. It is apparently facing the opposite direction as Canis Major and Procyon is its front shoulder.

To the northwest Pollux and Castor in Gemini the twins are next. They form the heads of these twin stick figures. Their bodies are to the south. If the Moon isn't in the way they can be seen holding hands.

Heading west we land on Capella, in Auriga. Auriga is Latin for the Charioteer, another description I fail to appreciate. To me Auriga is more like an elongated, misshapen pentagon with Capella on one of the points. It's a pretty big constellation.

Moving south brings us to Aldebaran in Taurus, the bull. Taurus can look like a bull, with the Hyades star cluster forming its face and snout. The Hyades is a large, pretty star cluster on its own. Look northeastward from there and visualize its horns. The rest is a little trickier. Taking a little side trip to the west of Aldebaran we check out the Pleiades star cluster. Greek in origin, the name was created for the Seven Divine Sisters of Pleione in mythology and contains over a thousand stars. On a good night I can see six easily. Simply gorgeous.

Getting back on track we head southeast from Aldebaran and run into Orion the hunter. Its full of bright stars and asterisms and really looks like something. Betelgeuse in the upper left, forms his right shoulder and Rigel in the lower right forms his left foot. OK, that's assuming he is facing us. He has a belt running diagonally and a sword hanging from his belt. Very cool!

That's a lot of bright stars!

What's in the Sky?

January15: A very thin waning crescent Moon joins Mercury and Saturn before sunrise in the southeast.