

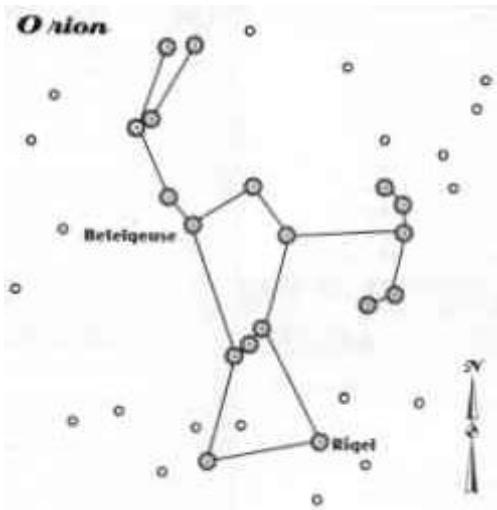
Constellations

A constellation is a pattern of stars in the sky. Note that it is only a pattern, the stars that make up a constellation may not be anywhere near each other! Over thousands of years the constellations will slowly change as the stars change apparent position.

There are many constellations, but some of the most famous and important are the Zodiacal constellations. As the Earth moves round the Sun (during a year) the Sun appears to be placed in different constellations. The twelve main ones are known as the Zodiacal constellations and are used in astrology (This has nothing to do with astronomy. In fact the system that astrologers use is out of date. They rely upon which constellation the Sun was in 4000 years ago!, which is not quite the same constellation as it would be in now as the Earth wobbles on its axis once every 26000 years, an effect called precession). Some examples are Leo, Virgo, Cancer.

During the night you will see most of the constellations move slowly across the sky as the Earth spins. Only the stars directly above the North Pole will remain stationary. Currently (for the next few thousand years) Polaris is a nice bright star that marks out the Celestial North Pole (Polaris marks north for the stars).

Some constellations you may see all year around, some may only be visible at certain times of the year. In the Northern Hemisphere, some of the most famous and easy to spot are:



Orion - The Hunter Orion is the brightest constellation in the winter sky and easy to find. The Dog Star, Sirius is the brightest star in the night sky and follows Orion to the east and below his master.

Ursa Major - The Great Bear Ursa Major contains the most recognised group of stars in the sky, the Big Dipper or The Plough. You can use this constellation to help you find Polaris, the Pole Star.

Ursa Minor - The Little Bear

Ursa Minor actually contains Polaris, the North Star. Polaris is like a compass in the sky, allowing you to find your way.

Crux - The Southern Cross Only visible in the Southern Hemisphere, this constellation performs the same job as Ursa Major, allowing you to find the 'South Celestial Pole'.

