

SCOPE On the skies

Shining quite brightly over the southern horizon is the second brightest star in our skies, Sirius, the Dog Star. Do you know what the brightest star in our skies is? While you are contemplating this question, read this short poem of unknown origin to help you remember that Sirius is known as the dog star.

Astronomically Correct

To one who trains a canine star, I cried,
"Why don't you teach him comedy
delirious?"

And to my foolish question he replied,
"The dog star, sir, at all times must be
Sirius!"

Sirius is often depicted as an eye in the constellation Canis Major, The Greater Dog, closely watching Orion. The hunter,

Orion, is chasing after Lepus the Hare, who is hidden in some bushes near his feet. Canis Major is nearby should Orion need his assistance. Canis Minor, the other hunting dog, would be an inconspicuous constellation were it not for the bright star Procyon. The name "Procyon" is derived from its early rising time, meaning *the dog who rises before Sirius*.

Both dogs are also thought to be waiting at a table for food crumbs to fall. By imagining Gemini as the table, and the fainter stars between the dogs and Gemini as the falling crumbs, one can almost see the two dogs cagerly waiting to pounce upon the crumbs.

Have you thought of the name of the brightest star? Perhaps you may not think of it as a star; it's the Sun!

Look to the sky to find companions in astronomy as well as mythology.

Twins together

Higher above the two hunting dogs, and over Orion's right shoulder, is a group of stars resembling two stick figures, each with a bright star marking its head. The constellation, known as Gemini, or the Twins, is represented by the bright stars Pollux and Castor. According to mythology, Pollux and Castor were twin sons of Jupiter. They were well educated and traveled with Jason on the Argonaut expedition in search of the Golden Fleece.

Sailors, in particular, highly regarded the twins as guardians of seafaring people, ridding the seas of pirates and buccaneers. It is said that sailors used to swear by the twins—using the phrase "by Gemini." Nowadays, we utter a similar phrase when we say "by Jiminy."

According to Greek and Roman mythology, Pollux was immortal and Castor was not. Much to Pollux's distress, Castor was killed during an argument over the ownership of some cattle. Because Pollux missed his brother so greatly, he asked Jupiter to let him die, so he could join his brother in the underworld. Unfortunately, immortals cannot die; however, Jupiter allowed Castor and Pollux to spend one day together in the sky amongst the Gods, and the following day in Hades, the underworld. This can be seen as Pollux rises after his brother to spend time in the sky, and then subsequently sets after his brother to spend time in the underworld.

From native American Indian tales comes a story about the "Sky Twins." The story begins with the birth of twin brothers in a village. Their birth was viewed as a bad omen, or a sign of things to come—after all, everyone knows that mischievous twins can wreak havoc, and these two were certainly no different.

The Seminole twins grew up to be rude and loud. They were always wrestling in dirt and mud, thumping each other loudly as they collided. Often, while chasing each

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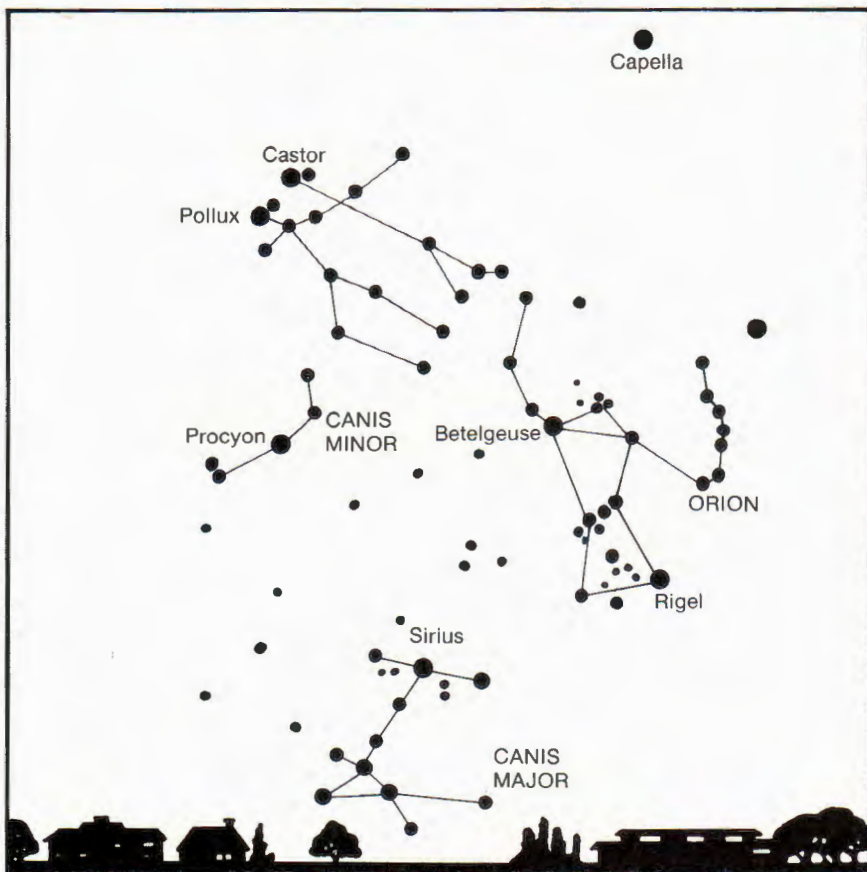
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LOOKING SOUTH ABOUT 9 P.M.

other around the village, they would knock over waterpots, spilling water everywhere. Others in the village soon grew weary of the twins' antics and began to yell at them to behave. The twins, on the other hand, were growing weary of always being scolded, and started looking for a different place to wrestle, away from those who yelled at them.

At one point during their search, the twins noticed an empty place in the sky. "This is where we should go," they said to each other. But no matter how high they jumped the twins just could not get high enough in the sky. "We should say special prayers, and eat special foods if we are to ever to go up into the sky to this place," they decided.

The twins began a week of saying special prayers and eating special foods, and at the end of the week, they were able to jump into their desired spot in the sky where they remain to this day.

So, during the early spring, if you hear loud crashes of thunder, do not be alarmed, for it is only those Sky Twins rolling around as they wrestle with each other. And those downpours of rain that happen so suddenly . . . that is the Sky Twins knocking over another waterpot.

Stellar geometry

Astronomers have identified 88 star patterns as constellations in our night skies. Star patterns that aren't "recognized" are known as asterisms. During the latter part of the winter, three asterisms are readily constructed using stars located over the southern horizon.

As discussed in the January column, stars from the winter constellations of Canis Major, Orion, Taurus, Auriga, and Canis Minor—Sirius, Rigel, Aldebaran, Capella, Castor (with Pollux), and Procyon—form the Winter Hexagon.

The winter "G" is formed by using the stars in the Winter Hexagon, omitting Aldebaran, and adding a line from Rigel to Betelgeuse (both of which appear in the constellation Orion the Hunter) to complete the "G." The pattern is best recognized as a "G" when it rises over the eastern horizon during the evening hours.

The third asterism to look for is another geometric shape—the Winter Triangle. Procyon, the focal star in Canis Minor; Betelgeuse in Orion; and Sirius in Canis Major form the vertices of a nearly perfect equilateral triangle.

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