

Constellations

Here is a starter list of prominent constellations which are easy to find and visible from suburban skies. Don't look for mythological figures in the sky! Simple patterns are the order of the day.

Circumpolar constellations are visible all night long at any time of year, circling Polaris, the North Star.

- Big Dipper: Second magnitude stars in the shape of a dipper.
- Little Dipper; follow pointer stars in the Big Dipper to Polaris.
 - The Dippers pour into each other.
 - From suburban skies, only Polaris and the two 'Guard Stars' at the end of the Little Dipper bowl are visible.
- Cassiopeia: 'W' shaped; but could be tilted or upside down. On the opposite side of the Little Dipper from the Big Dipper

Winter Constellations:

- Orion the Hunter is large and prominent to the south. Four bright stars in a rectangle mark his body, with Betelgeuse, a red super giant, on the upper left, and Rigel, a blue giant, on the lower right. Orion wears a belt of three 2nd magnitude stars and a fainter sword of three (clusters) of stars. The Orion nebula surrounds the middle sword star. The sword and nebula may not be visible from suburban skies.
- Orion has two hunting dogs:
 - Canis Major, the Big Dog, is to the lower left and obvious because it contains Sirius, the brightest night time star. The dog is sort of a stick dog, standing on his hind legs.
- Off of Orion's left shoulder (on our right) is Taurus, the Bull, containing Aldebaran, a bright red giant. Taurus has the shape of a 'V' marking his horns. To the west are the Pleiades, a small asterism of about 7 stars (which are within the constellation of Taurus the Bull).

Spring Time Constellations:

- Bootes the Herdsman and Arcturus, a red giant star; Follow the curve of the Big Dipper handle to Arcturus. Bootes has a kite pattern. He can be seen up to early Fall.
- Spica, a bright blue-white star: Follow the curve of the Big Dipper handle past Arcturus to Spica. Spica is in Virgo, a non-descript constellation in appearance, but contains the Virgo galaxy cluster.
- Leo the Lion and the bright yellow star, Regulus. Leo is underneath the bowl and handle of the Big Dipper. The head of Leo is a reverse '?' or sickle and the hindquarters are a triangle.

Summer Time Constellations:

- Summer Triangle (asterism):
 - The three first magnitude stars, Deneb, Vega, and Altair, make up the Summer Triangle.
 - Deneb is in the constellation of Cygnus the Swan. The swan has the shape of a cross. The cross arm is the wing, the long part of the cross is the long neck of the swan, and the short part of the cross is the tail of the swan. Deneb is at the end of the tail. Cygnus is often known as the Northern Cross. Deneb is at the top of the cross.
 - Vega is in the constellation of Lyra the Lyre. Vega is brilliant and Lyra is a small collection of stars adjacent to Vega; most prominent is a small rectangle of stars.
 - Altair is in Aquila the Eagle, a misc. collection of medium bright stars.
- The summer Milky Way runs the length of the Northern Cross, south into Aquila, and on to Sagittarius and Scorpius..
- Following the Milky Way down, to low into the southern sky, brings us to Sagittarius the Archer. Most amateur astronomers see a 'teapot'. There are no 1st magnitude stars in this constellation.
- Just to the west of Sagittarius is Scorpius the Scorpion and Antares, a bright red super giant star. Antares marks the heart of the scorpion, his head reaches up to the right (west) and his body and tail curve down to the left (east). At the end of the tail is a wide double marking his stinger.