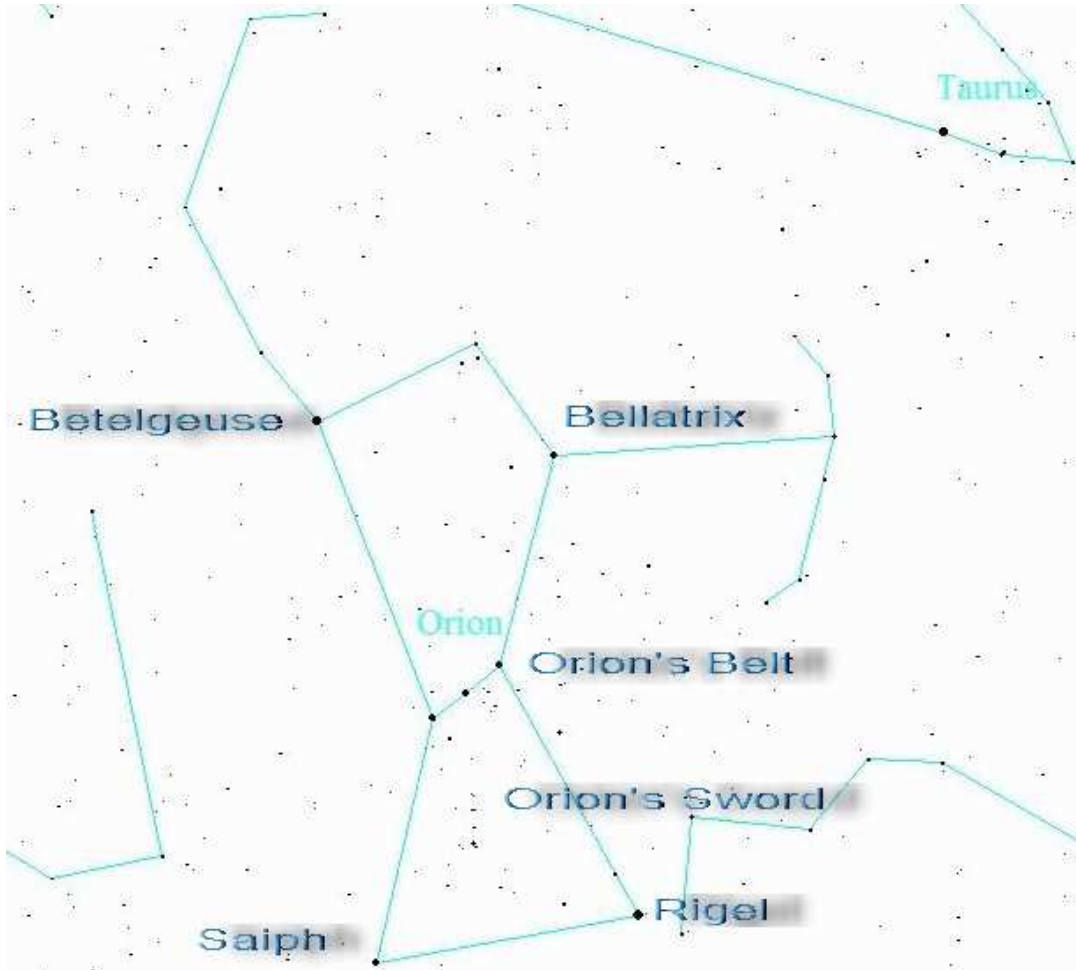


Orion- The Swordsman of the Sky - A Winter Constellation *from the Starlight Cascade Observatory 2006 January*

From the ancient times of Babylon, the stars have depicted stories and lore in the skies to tell us of the life cycle, the battles of the earth, and the love of the earth and heavens.



Orion is also known as "The Mighty Hunter", "The Swordsman of the Sky", and "The Celestial Warrior". It is one of the constellations that is seen by everyone on earth.

Though it seems we can touch The Mighty Hunter in the sky, Orion is composed of stars ranging from 243 light years (Bellatrix) away to 522 light years (Betelgeuse) to 776 light years (Rigel). A light year is a measure of distance, which is about 9,500,000,000,000,000 kilometres. To put this into scale, the Sun is only 8 light minutes away, Pluto is about 5 light hours away and the nearest star (Alpha Centauri) is about 4 light years away. So 1 light year x 522 to Betelgeuse equals a long way away.

Orion's most famous marking is Orion's Belt, consisting of 3 stars in a row (from left to right, Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka). Off to the centre of his belt, is his sword, which has many treasures, one of which you can see in a pair of binoculars. Messier Object number 42 (or M42 the Orion Nebula), M43 (de Marion's Nebula) and the Trapezium, which consists of four stars, approximately the same brightness in a box shape. This object

however does require a telescope to see it. The Orion Nebula also holds fainter objects, which require magnification to see them, such as the Horse Head Nebula.

You have to imagine, and possibly take your finger to join the dots, but you can virtually see the shoulders of Orion. The left shoulder star (seen from our vantage point) is Betelgeuse. This is a red super giant star, which also happens to be an irregular variable star in its final stages of life, but still has several millions of years before it explodes. Its brightness tends to vary over a period of hours to days or longer. The right shoulder star is Bellatrix. The bottom right knee star is Rigel, a blue-white giant star, and the bottom left knee star is Saiph.

Orion appears to be arching his bow towards Taurus the Bull, and his other hand holding his shield or club. He is also followed by his two faithful hunting dogs, Canis Major, and Canis Minor. Taurus has a bright red eye Aldeberan (another red giant star), and is thought to be charging Orion. It is possibly showing the eternal conflict of good versus evil, but there are few if any articles that we have found that have been widely accepted. Orion did kill the Scorpion (the constellation Scorpius), which earned Orions' way into the heavens. So the Gods of the time decided for there to be no more trouble between Orion and Scorpius, the two were placed in opposite sides of the sky. This means Orion is a winter constellation, whereas Scorpius is a summer constellation.

Orion rises along the ecliptic in the South East in the mid afternoon and as the sky darkens the stars seem to pop out and show us the constellations. As it travels westward through the night, it then sets in the early morning hours. The best time to view Orion in February is around 9:00 pm looking south.

Orion is visible without any optical aid, but to see more detail a good set of binoculars (10 x 50's are best). For the more advanced observer, telescopes will give you more ability to see finer detail, but only good quality telescopes will do this. The department stores sub\$200 small white tube that claim large magnification will not give you a good experience, and you will be horribly disappointed. Good optics are the best part of the telescope, along with a good eyepiece.

The above constellations, and many others can be seen in a star map that is available in many planetary programs, the internet and some of the astronomy magazines (like Skynews) that are available in the book stores. If you get a chance in the summer months you can also try to attend a star party. You can observe many wonders of the universe through different types of telescopes, binoculars, and can ask questions, in which party-goers would be glad to answer them. For a list of Canadian Star parties, visit http://www.telusplanet.net/public/fenertyb/sp_list.htm

Learn the sky first with your star map and binoculars. You will not be disappointed as there are many wondrous sights up there. Remember to dress warm and in layers for any observing session, and most of all enjoy yourself.

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Starmap provided by the Earth Centered Universe software by Dave Lane at <http://www.nova-astro.com/>