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## Pictures in the Stars, Legends in the Sky

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Have you ever watched the clouds float by? Did you ever think that one looked like an elephant or a clown? It's fun to think that the clouds are shaped like some familiar animal or person. People long ago did the same thing with the stars at night. Some groups of stars were named after animals. Some were named for people in myths or legends. Some were even named for familiar objects.



Today, astronomers say there are 88 constellations. Each constellation is an area in the sky. Each area has boundaries. You may already know some constellations. The Big Dipper (not a constellation) is part of the constellation Ursa Major, or the Big Bear. The two front stars of the dipper point to Polaris, the North Star. Polaris is located at the end of the Little Dipper, part of the constellation Ursa Minor. Polaris is almost directly over Earth's North Pole. It has been used by sailors to find their way on the sea at night.

The bright star Betelgeuse (BEET ul juice) is part of the constellation of Orion, the Hunter. Orion's faithful dog is by his side, the constellation Canis Major. The word "canine" comes from the word canis, the Latin word for dog. The brightest sky in the winter sky is Sirius, a star in the constellation Canis Major.

Orion and Canis Major can be seen in the evening winter sky. During other seasons, they are not visible in North America. All the constellations look like they move because the Earth is moving.

As Earth rotates, you can watch Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, and other constellations circle around Polaris, the North Star. They are called circumpolar constellations. Because Polaris is almost directly over the North Pole (or the Earth's axis), it doesn't appear to move much as the Earth rotates. The stars look like they complete one full circle in the sky in just under twenty-four hours as the Earth rotates on its axis.

Circumpolar constellations are visible all year long. Other constellations are not. The stars seem to change positions in the sky throughout the year as the Earth revolves around the sun. Different constellations appear while others disappear. Orion can't be seen in the summertime in North America because the daytime side of Earth is facing it.

Scorpius, the Scorpion, is another constellation that can be seen in the summer in North America. You would find it low in the southern sky. The brightest star in the Scorpius constellation is Antares. It is about 600 light years from Earth. Antares is a red supergiant star in the Milky Way galaxy. Its diameter is about 700 times larger than our sun! If Antares replaced our sun in the center of our solar system, it would extend past the orbit of Mars!

Betelgeuse is closer to Earth-427 light years away. It is part of the constellation of Orion, the Hunter. Betelgeuse is also a red supergiant star. It is one of the largest stars known. It is believed to be only a few million years old. It has evolved quickly because of its size. Some astronomers believe it will go supernova in as little as a thousand

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years. When that happens, Betelgeuse will shine more brightly than the full moon in our nighttime sky!

The largest constellation is Hydra. This constellation looks like a winding snake. It covers almost one quarter of the sky. None of its stars are very eye-catching. It is best seen in March and April. The water snake is the subject of at least two Greek legends.

One story says that the Greek god Apollo sent a crow to fetch water in a bowl and bring it back to him. Instead, the crow stopped to eat figs from a tree. When the crow finally went back to Apollo, it blamed the water snake for keeping him away from the spring. Apollo knew the bird was lying. He punished him by throwing the crow, the bowl, and the water snake into the sky. The water snake eternally keeps the crow from drinking from the bowl. This legend also accounts for the constellations of the Crow (Corvus) and the Cup (Crater) that appear to lie on the back of Hydra.

The next time you are star-gazing, look for some of these pictures in the stars. Some of the stories that go with them are very old. Perhaps you could make up your own legends about the constellations!

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. How many constellations are recognized today?
- A. 600
  - B. 88
  - C. 427
  - D. 12
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What is another name for the North Star?
- A. Ursa Major
  - B. Betelgeuse
  - C. Polaris
  - D. Ursa Minor
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The brightest star in the winter sky is \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Sirius
  - B. Polaris
  - C. Betelgeuse
  - D. Antares
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Circumpolar constellations appear to do which of these?
- A. change positions in the sky throughout the year
  - B. grow dimmer as the Earth rotates
  - C. shine more brightly as the Earth rotates
  - D. circle around Polaris, the North Star, each night

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Polaris is the star that seems to stand still as other stars rotate around it.
- A. false
  - B. true
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Which constellations are visible all year long?
- A. Canis Major and Orion
  - B. circumpolar constellations
  - C. Hydra, Corvus, and Crater
  - D. all of these
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Which particular star helped sailors find their way at sea?
- A. Polaris
  - B. Antares
  - C. Betelgeuse
  - D. Sirius
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Constellations appear to move because:
- A. The Earth rotates on its axis.
  - B. The Earth revolves around the sun.
  - C. both a and b
  - D. none of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Antares and Betelgeuse are what type of stars?
- A. medium yellow
  - B. brown dwarf
  - C. red supergiant
  - D. white dwarf
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Which constellation is the largest?
- A. Orion
  - B. Ursa Major
  - C. Canis Major
  - D. Hydra