

2.6: The Pleiades and The Big Dipper

The Pleiades

An asterism is a pattern of stars within a constellation, or composed of a number of constellations. The Pleiades, an open star cluster in the constellation of Taurus, is easy to find, and often confused as the Little Dipper. The Greek Pleiades myth is that there were seven sisters who were the daughters of Atlas and Pleione, a sea nymph. Zeus placed the sisters in the sky to protect them.

The Japanese call the Pleiades *Subaru*, Hawaiians *Makahiki* or many little eyes, and the Navajo *Dilyehe* the planting stars which represent youth. ⁽¹⁾



A bronze disk, ca. 1600 BC, from Nebra, Germany, is one of the oldest known representations of the cosmos. The Pleiades are at the top right. ["Nebra Scheibe" by Dbachmann is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)]



The Pleiades, an asterism known as The Seven Sisters. Many mistake the Pleiades as the Little Dipper. [“The Pleiades” by Dr. Mike Reynolds, Florida State College at Jacksonville is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)]

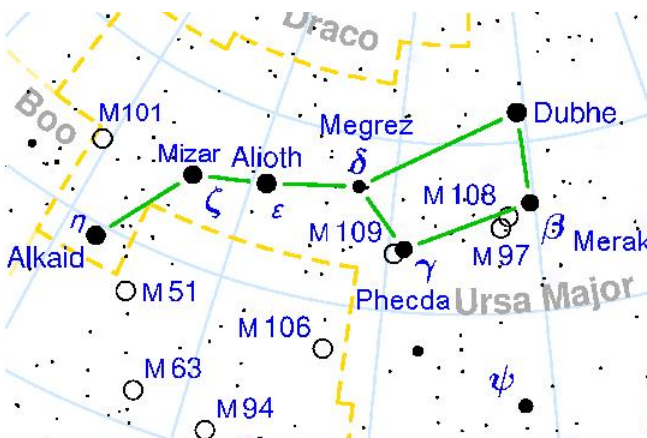


Subaru — the Japanese name for the asterism we call the Pleiades — is the symbol used for the Japanese automaker by the same name [“Subaru Pleiades” by Allen McCloud is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#) / A derivative from the original work]

The Big Dipper

Perhaps the best-known asterism, at least in the northern hemisphere, is the Big Dipper, part of the constellation of Ursa Major, the Big Bear. It is easy to recognize, and does look like a dipper. Other cultures have identified it as a plow, wagon, barbeque pit, and perhaps the most meaningful, the drinking gourd.

As escaped slaves were leaving the south during the Civil War, they traveled north at night to try to go undetected. They were given directions to “follow the drinking gourd.” Since the Big Dipper is a constellation near the north celestial pole and the pole star Polaris, they could easily find the asterism and walk towards it; their own GPS system. ⁽¹⁾



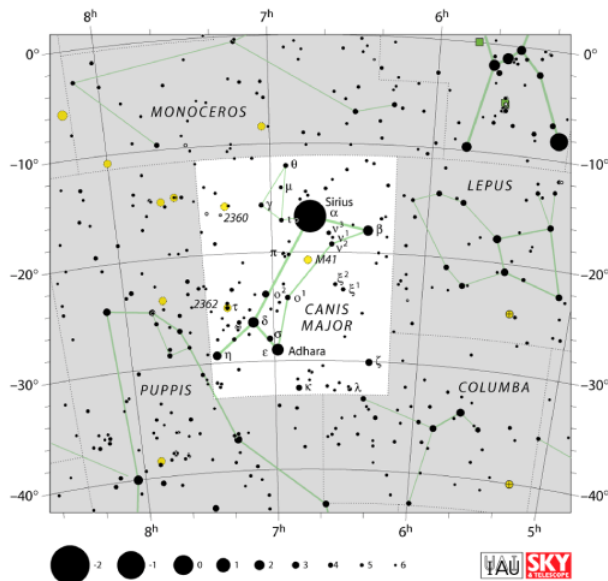
The Big Dipper, made up of four stars for the dipper’s bowl and three stars for the handle [“Ursa Major constellation detail map” by SAE1962 is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)]

Modern Constellations

Today we recognize 88 modern constellations, adopted by the International Astronomical Union in 1928. At the same time, the International Astronomical Union adopted constellation boundaries, much like state boundaries within a country like the United States.

Perhaps one of the most-intriguing — and disturbing — modern constellation stories took place in 2013, when a 22-year old New Hampshire woman stabbed her father during a fight outside while trying to identify constellations.

Finding constellations depend on your location; the less lighting you have, the better. Under some city lighting conditions, it is difficult to even find the bright stars, nevertheless many of the fainter stars that make up a constellation’s stick figure outline. ⁽¹⁾



This star chart shows the modern constellation Canis Major, the Big or Great Dog, as well as its constellation boundaries [“Canis Major” from IAU is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)]

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