

Winter "Star" (or less memorably, winter hexagon)

Pollux & Castor

in Gemini. C&P shared an immortal mother but had different fathers; Pollux is a god, Castor is mortal. Castor is a sextuple star system; Pollux is a single yellow-orange star with at least one planet

Capella

in Auriga, the Charioteer (which looks more like a slightly squished outline of home plate). Capella sounds cool, but means "she goat." Look for her "kids" a fetching triangle of stars right nearby.

Aldebaran

in Taurus, the Bull; look for a definite "V" shape, add "horns" & you get a bull head

Procyon (bright white)

named "before the dog" – the star to watch for rising just ahead of Sirius. Arguably the least memorable of all constellations

Rigel (bright, ice blue)

in Orion, Rigel is huge and 40,000 times as bright as our sun, but a long ways – 700 light years – away

Sirius (brilliant, fiery blue)

in AK, just above the horizon. As a result its light passes through lots of atmosphere, & consequently seems alive with sparkling bursts of color



When, Where and Why

A good way to get oriented in a sky full of unrecognizable stars is to learn a couple of big star patterns, one each in summer, fall & winter. Easiest is this set of winter constellations, sometimes called the winter Hexagon (anybody have a better name?). Go outside on the next clear winter evening and look generally south/southeast. You'll see a broad scattering of bright stars, the biggest collection of bright stars you can see in one part of the sky at any time of year. Find familiar Orion to get started. Orion (more or less) lines up with and is of similar size as Gemini. The rest of this "meta- constellation" is huge, extending from Sirius – glittering red/blue/silver on the southern horizon – to peaceful Capella, guarding her kids high overhead. Learn in the basic shape indoors where it's warm, then find it out in the cold.