

COLUMNISTS

In the summer night sky, it's goodbye Orion, hello Scorpius

Mike Richins Special to the Reporter-News

Published 5:00 p.m. CT June 7, 2020

As the seasons change, so does the night sky.

Winter's favorite constellation, Orion the hunter, has disappeared in the west giving way to a host of new summer constellations, not the least of which is Scorpius.

Scorpius, the scorpion, can be seen rising in the east shortly after nightfall and will rise higher and higher in the sky as summer progresses.

Orion and Scorpius never are seen together in the sky; legend has it that this is due to a raging battle. Proud Orion once boasted to the goddess, Artemis, that he was such a great hunter that he would kill all the beasts of the earth. To quell Orion's ego, Artemis sent the scorpion to kill him. After a long and arduous encounter, Scorpius stung and killed the mighty hunter.

To honor the scorpion the gods placed it in the sky opposite Orion. Orion is allowed to hunt freely during the winter, but as summer approaches the scorpion arises and chases the hunter away.

Scorpius is one of the few constellations that actually looks like its namesake. Three bowed stars represent the head and pinchers of the scorpion and a series of stars form an "s" shape which comprise its body and tail. A faint star at the very end of the tail is its stinger.

The main star in the Scorpius constellation is the bright red giant Antares which shines 10,000 times greater than our sun. Scorpius also includes many deep space objects that are amazing sights when viewed through a telescope.

One is M6, nicknamed the Butterfly Cluster; an open cluster of stars that with a bit of imagination is in the shape of a butterfly. M7, the Ptolemy Cluster is another open cluster of about 80 stars and is named after its discoverer, the Greek astronomer. M80 is a globular

cluster in the constellation which contains hundreds of thousands of stars held in a compact globular form by gravity. Globular clusters, though not as common as open clusters, are beautiful to view.

Another prominent constellation of the summer sky is Leo, the lion. In mythology, Leo was killed by the hero Hercules (also in the summer sky) as the first of the 12 labors Hercules was asked to perform to assuage his guilt and achieve immortality.

Leo was a fierce opponent whose skin could not be pierced by any weapon. Knowing this, Hercules fought him with his bare hands and completed his first task by choking Leo to death. Hercules then skinned the lion using one of its claws and wore the skin through the rest of his life.

The constellation Leo is found by locating the backward question mark in the sky, which is its head. Its primary star is Regulus, or heart of the Lion. Regulus is interesting because it is not a single star, but a four-star system which is two sets of binary stars, rotating around each other held by their gravitational attraction. The constellation has several deep space objects, many of which are spiral galaxies; however, they are particularly challenging to spot.

The summer sky has many other stars and deep sky objects that are wonderful to view such as M8, the Lagoon Nebula. It is found in Sagittarius, a cluster/nebula combination that can easily be seen through binoculars or even with the naked eye on clear dark nights.

Finally, on Aug. 12, stay out late and look for meteors in the Perseids Meteor Shower. The earth's orbit will pass through the remnants of a comet, causing ice and dust particles to come blazing through the atmosphere creating an amazing increase in meteor activity. Sometimes as many as 60 to 80 per hour or more can be seen. No equipment required, just sit outdoors in a dark place and watch the sky.

Summer nights are a great time to get out and enjoy the stars! Abilene State Park and the Big Country Master Naturalists will continue to host star parties at the park as soon as it is deemed safe. In the meantime, grab a lawn chair or blanket, get outside on a warm, clear evening and look up!

This article is courtesy of the Big Country Master Naturalists. We are sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Texas A & M AgriLife Extension Service. Our goal is to reach out to other Texans and provide education and service benefiting our natural areas.