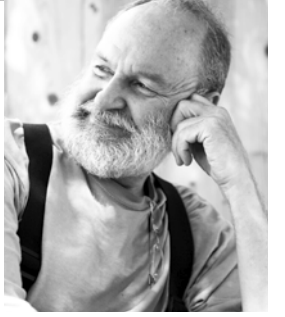


THE STARRY SIDE

Gateway to the stars

BY GREELEY WELLS

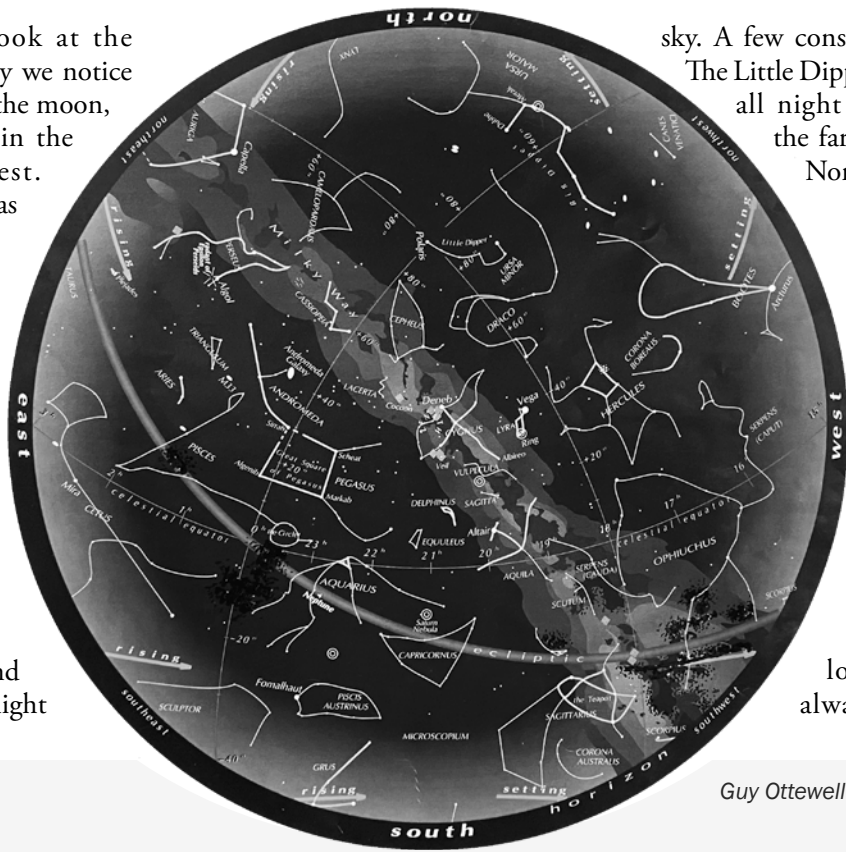


Greeley Wells

Let me take a broad look at the night sky with you. Generally we notice the sweep of it all—the sun, the moon, and the stars—from rising in the east to setting in the west. (Meteors go every which way, as do our satellites!)

But there is one star in the north that does not move at all. It's the North Star—Polaris—and it's the center of our northern hemisphere. All the other stars and constellations go around it.

The farther a constellation is from Polaris, the wider its sweep. The closer it is to Polaris, the shorter its sweep and the longer it's visible in the night



sky. A few constellations don't ever set. The Little Dipper, for instance, is visible all night in all seasons because the far end of its handle is the North Star.

This simple realization is actually quite powerful. From Polaris, everything else will proceed, like a key that unlocks the sky for you. There it is: Something you can always find! Once you stand at a particular place in your yard, or even look out a particular northern window, and locate Polaris, you can always find it again from

that spot. From my deck, I have a view of two large trees some distance apart and some shorter ones below. I can always find the North Star between the two tall trees and above the short ones! *Always!*

So first you have to know where north is. Stand with the place the sun rises on your right (that's east) and the place where it sets on your left (that's west), and you're looking north. Not rocket science. But if you've never done it, it's a treat to be predictably oriented any time you step outside and look at the sky.

Here's an insight about distances that will help you find the North Star once you're facing north: The North Star is about halfway between the zenith (the point directly overhead) and the horizon. The width of your finger is about one degree when held out at arm's length. Your fist is about five degrees. Two fists are about ten degrees, which is about the same as a stretched-out hand at arm's length. To find the North Star, imagine or see the horizon line. About two outstretched hands plus one fist above the horizon line, you will find Polaris.

If you've gotten this far, you're well on your way to discovering the constellations of the night sky and already know a really important one. Finding the Little Dipper (Ursa Minor, or, in Native American lore, the Little Bear) is a good start, and it's as easy as finding the North Star.

To find more constellations, check out the sky map on this page.

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OF NOTE

Mercury is in the dusk in September and the dawn in October and November.

Venus is in the evening all three of these months. And nicely bright.

Mars is going to be invisible all fall.

Jupiter is viewable each evening in the fall. It is the brightest "star" you'll see all night. In early evening, it rises in the east. By midnight, it's in the south, and by morning in the west. A real treat!

Saturn is another evening planet this season, but rarely bright.

Draconid meteor shower (a medium shower) takes place in the early evening on October 8. Evening showers are rare because the radiant starts high but then drops, cutting off what few may show up. Nonetheless, the Draconid shower is sometimes amazing.

Taurid meteors, near Taurus the Bull, will be visible after midnight on November 4 and before dawn on November 5. The moon leaves the sky by midnight, so they

should still be visible in the morning throughout this week.

Taurids strike again, but modestly, when the North Taurids overlap the Taurids from October 12 to December 2, but only about five per hour. Typically, the maximum occurs around midnight when the constellation is highest in the sky.

Leonid meteors normally number just 10-15 an hour before dawn, after the moon has set. November 17 is the best morning to try for some.

Guy Ottewell's *Astronomical Calendar*

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