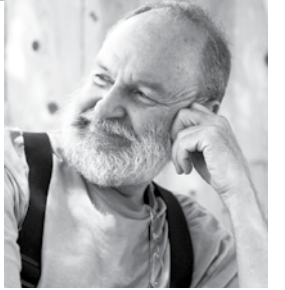


THE STARRY SIDE

The galaxy's twist

BY GREELEY WELLS



Greeley Wells

I've been following the Summer Triangle, with its northern cross, through the seasons. In early summer, it rose in the east, aligned flat with the horizon line. In midsummer, it was diagonally overhead, having made a half twist from northeast to southwest. In fall, the cross moved southwest and stood almost upright. In winter, it will set—now standing vertically overhead. This is one of the clearest examples of how our sky not only moves just east to west but also makes a slow 90-degree twist each season. All my life, I've been thinking the constellations just moved from east to west, maybe tilting a bit to the south as they went. This is the first season I've confirmed the galaxy's "twist" for myself!

Last season, the great square Pegasus was low in the east as the Northern Cross made it close to overhead. Now Pegasus is high in the west, and the Northern Cross is setting.

Now rising in the east-southeast is Orion, the hunter, with his dog, the constellation Canis Major. Sirius, the "dog star" in Canis Major, is the brightest star in the winter sky. Sirius will rise by mid-December, in line with Orion's three-in-a-row belt (to its left). Orion is resting on his back now but will rise to standing in the next few months in the south and continue to stand as he sinks toward the

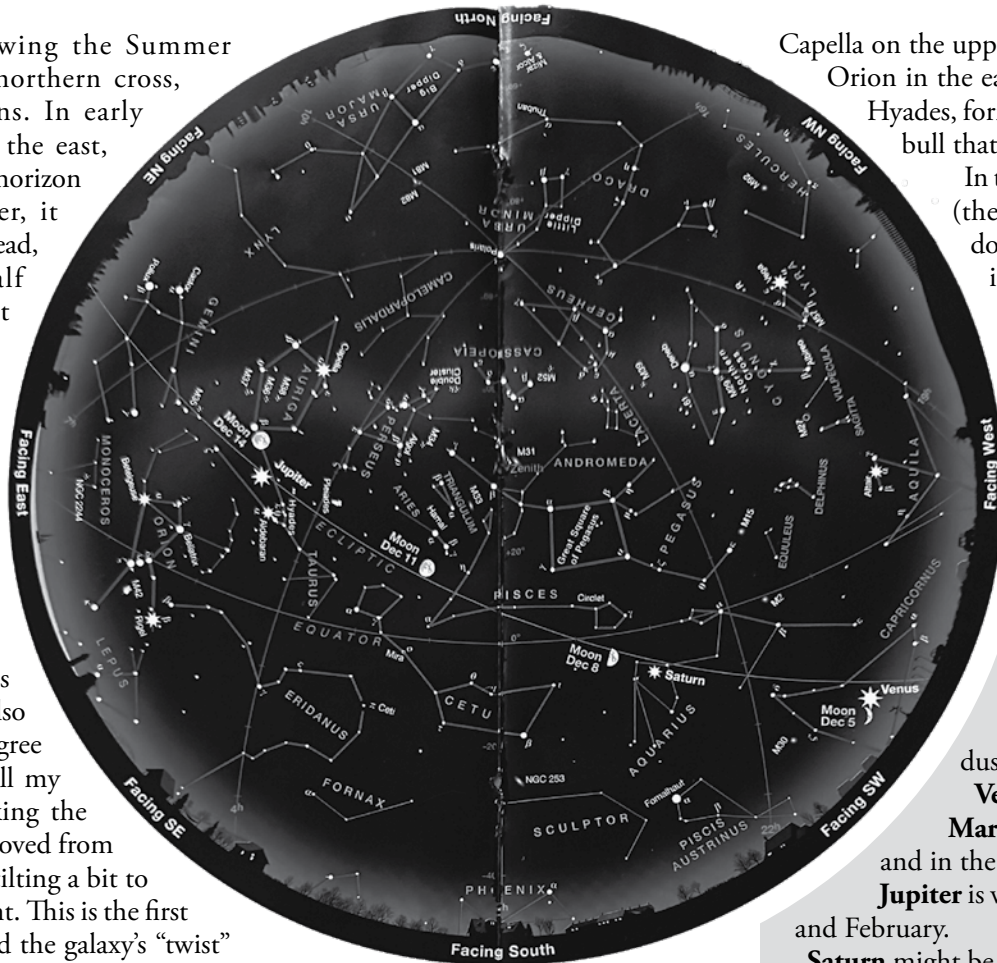


Image: Sky & Telescope (skyandtelescope.org).

horizon next season. East along the line formed by Sirius and Orion's belt, there is an obvious "V" of stars to the right. That's Taurus, the bull, fighting with Orion. Taurus has a short face but long horns; between the horns sits bright Jupiter, our biggest, brightest planet and the brightest thing in the sky right now.

Above the east-northeast horizon line are two bright stars: Castor and Pollux, the Gemini twins. Above them is the five-sided Auriga, the charioteer, with the bright star

Capella on the upper right. Also, above Orion in the east is the star cluster Hyades, forming the head of the bull that Orion is fighting.

In the north, Cassiopeia (the "W," now upside-down in an "M" shape) is sliding over the top of the North Star, while the Big Dipper, Ursa Major, is sliding under it. The Little Dipper, Ursa Minor, sticks with the North Star, which

is the last star in its handle—it hangs from the North Star like it's hanging from a hook.

This whole parade keeps coming. Some stars leave the stage in the west, and new ones steadily show up in the east—dramatically seasonally, and slowly nightly. Amazing!

I love how they all seem to move and even twist, but actually, it's we who rotate in our view of this predictable and beautiful sky that can fascinate and inspire, teach and challenge, surprise and delight.

Wishing you warm, dark, clear skies.

Greeley Wells
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— OF NOTE —

Planets

Mercury is visible at dawn in December and January, then at dusk in February.

Venus, an evening "star," is very bright all three months.

Mars is visible in the early morning in December, all night in January, and in the evening in February.

Jupiter is visible all night long in December, then in the evening in January and February.

Saturn might be visible in December evenings. In January, it will show up in the evening, and in February, at dusk.

Meteor showers

Geminids. Since the radiant rises in mid-evening, you can watch for the Geminids all night around the peak date of December 13. Although an almost-full moon will compete with the shower, it lasts all month, so you'll have many chances to see some meteors. Under a dark sky with no moon, you might catch 120 Geminid meteors per hour! (You can put the moon behind a building or tree to help darken the sky and your eye.) The bold, white, bright Geminids gives us one of the northern hemisphere's best showers.

Ursids. Watch for Ursid meteors—up to ten per hour—in early mornings between December 13 and 24. You might even see some intermingling with the Geminids' peak.

Quadrantids. The best nights for the 2024 Quadrantids are January 2 and 3. The Quadrantid shower is one of four major meteor showers each year with a sharp peak, producing (briefly) over 100 meteors per hour.

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