

Find the Winter Triangle; look above it for Gemini

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Popular Astronomy Club

A triangle and the twins dominate the night sky in February.

To the naked eye, planets appear to be bright "stars" that don't twinkle and, over time, move across the sky. Venus is the bright "star" above the horizon just after sunset. Mars is dimmer and reddish, just above Venus for the entire month.

On Feb. 20, a very slim crescent moon appears north of the pair to form a trio of solar system objects.

The planet Jupiter is bright and high in the sky throughout the month, and on Feb. 6, it's directly opposite of the sun.

Jupiter will rise at sunset, be visible all night and set at sunrise on Feb. 7.

Opposition puts Jupiter as close to the Earth as it ever gets. It won't appear significantly larger to the naked eye, but telescope observers can see more detail with higher magnifications.

Throughout February, the constellation Orion dominates the southern sky. As it was showcased in last month's column, we'll use it as a stepping stone to other stellar sights.

The brightest nighttime star, Sirius, is to the southeast. It represents the head of the constellation Canis Major, the Great Dog. East of Orion is another bright star called Procyon in Canis Minor, the Lesser Dog.

Along with Betelgeuse, the bright star in the upper left corner of Orion, these stars form the Winter Triangle. They are three of the 10 brightest stars in the night sky.

Above this winter triangle is the ancient constellation of the Zodiac Gemini the Twins. In Greek mythology, both boys had the same mother: Leda, Queen of Sparta. Pollux was the son of the Greek god Zeus, while Castor's father was the mortal King of Sparta.

They excelled as horsemen and hunters. Both served on the crew of Jason's ship Argo, and Greeks regarded them as the patrons of sailors. Ancients believed St. Elmo's fire was a manifestation of the twins.

They had a long-standing feud with their cousins involving cattle rustling. Castor was wounded in a skirmish with them. Pollux, the son of a god, asked Zeus to give the dying mortal Castor half of his immortality, so they could remain together forever.

As a result, Zeus placed them in the sky, and they are the two brightest stars in Gemini. Castor is dimmer and higher in the sky than Pollux. Other brighter stars in the constellation form two roughly parallel lines pointing back towards Orion.

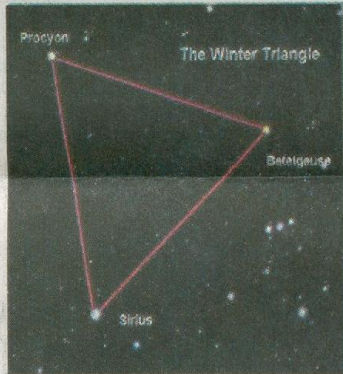
H.A. Rey, author of "Curious George" children's books, devised modern, less confusing constellation patterns. His diagram of Gemini is of two stick men holding hands.

Gemini's most prominent non-stellar object is the open star cluster called Messier 35. Open star clusters are defined as a group of widely spaced stars that formed from the same interstellar gas cloud. Naturally, these stars are roughly the same age and are loosely bound together by gravity.

The Messier 35 group of stars covers an area of the sky as large as Earth's moon. It can be detected with binoculars in local skies, but it's a glittering collection of stars when viewed in any size telescope.

It's just to the northwest of star "Propus" representing Castor's "foot."

The other noteworthy nonstellar object in Gemini is the "Eskimo" nebulae, a gas bubble surrounding an old, dying star. It requires an accurately pointed telescope to be seen, so attend Popular Astronomy Club's star parties to have a look.



Quad City Astronomy Club

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