

Giants in the sky

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When ancient mapmakers didn't know for sure what was beyond the edge of what was drawn on their maps, they wrote in, "Here there be giants."

In addition to the giants of Orion and Hercules, there is another giant character from mythology who inhabits our sky. Unfortunately, this one is a little more difficult to locate.

He is called, "The Serpent Bearer" and goes by the name of Ophiuchus (pronounced Oh-fee-you-kus).

Many ancient cultures have associated this constellation with a snake. His name translates as "Serpent Bearer" and on both of its sides are small groupings of stars representing the head of a snake (Serpens Caput) and its body, or tail (Serpens Cauda).

The Romans associated it with Asclepius, the god of healing, which is why the symbol of two snakes entwined on a stick (a caduceus) is the modern symbol of medicine.

Ophiuchus is an odd-shaped polygon—mostly rectangular—located in the southeastern sky. Its stars are mostly second and third magnitude so you will need a moderately dark sky to help locate them.

One locator help will be to draw a line from Vega—our old friend from the Summer Triangle in Lyra, the Harp—down to the right to Antares in Scorpius. This line will run almost down the length of Ophiuchus.

If you remember how to find Hercules from last week, Ophiuchus is just to its lower right.

There are several Messier objects in Ophiuchus as well as numerous double stars and the general sprinkling of star clusters and galaxies. It is a good place to roam with a pair of binoculars.

SKY WATCH: New moon, Saturday, June 8. The spectacular triple planet meet-up with Venus, Jupiter, and Mercury of last week is over. However, Mercury and Venus remain in our evening sky to entertain us for a few more weeks.

At present both planets are appearing higher in the evening sky each night and will continue to do so until June 19, when Venus will catch up with fleet-footed Mercury and the tiny planet will then head for the horizon.

Venus continues on for a spectacular meeting with M44, the Beehive star cluster, and Regulus, the brightest star in Leo, the Lion in July.

On Monday, June 10, a very skinny crescent moon will join Mercury and Venus in the western evening sky. Look about a half-hour to 45 minutes after local sunset. This is also a good time to look for evidence of Earthshine, the light of the Sun reflected off Earth's surface back onto the moon creating an almost ghost-like face for the moon.

Saturn is now a very observable evening object being high in the south about an hour after local sunset. For a really good view of its rings a telescope will be needed. Saturn and the star

Spica, the brightest star in Virgo, the Maiden, are close, looking like a small imitation of Castor and Pollux in Gemini and are very similar in brightness,

A good way to tell them apart is to remember that stars twinkle, and planets don't.