

Learn to navigate the night

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

“Star light, star bright; first star I see tonight.” You ever say that little poem? I think a lot of us have.

So, what is the first star you will see tonight?

Well, depends which way you are looking.

If you are looking almost directly overhead the first star you will probably see is Vega, the brightest star in Lyra, the Harp, and the fifth brightest star in the night sky or it could be Altair in Aquila, the Eagle, one of the three stars in the Summer Triangle below and to the lower right of Vega.

Possibly coming in third could be Arcturus in Bootes. It is visible in the west about halfway up the sky.

Another star popping out of the early evening light as the sky slowly darkens is Antares, the brightest star in Scorpio located low in the south. We visited Antares a couple of weeks ago.

About now the star Spica will be popping out of the growing darkness. It is the brightest star in Virgo, the Maiden and is very low in the southwest and can be found by following the arc in the handle of the Big Dipper. Remember the little saying, “Arc to Arcturus, then speed on the Spica.”

When you find Spica, look up and left for another bright object, the planet Saturn. It will be a fine object for even small telescopes for a couple more weeks, but it too is sinking toward the western horizon.

Beginning about now as the early evening darkens it, the sky will be populated with lots more stars about as quickly as you can look anywhere.

The stars of the Big Dipper will appear almost altogether at once in the north, Scorpio and Sagittarius in the south.

From now on you will need a good star map to keep up with all of them.

The point is, if you want to enjoy astronomy, you need to learn your way around the night sky. Learn what stars are in which constellation, and which constellation is where and when it will be there.

You will need to know that Scorpio is a summer constellation, that Orion is a winter one, and Pegasus (which will appear in the eastern sky rising about an hour to an hour and a half after local sunset) is an early autumn constellation.

Our ancestors used the stars and constellations to tell them not only when the seasons were changing, but when to plant or begin harvest and to some extent how to predict the weather.

They knew that if the Big Dipper was difficult to see or there was a ring around the moon, that there could be rain or other moisture in a few days, so viewing the sky was more than just entertainment to them.

The night sky was important to our ancestors and it was more than just something to look at. It helped them arrange and order their lives.

SKY WATCH: First quarter moon, tonight, Wednesday, Aug. 14. Since the moon is at first quarter it is once a good time to view it during daylight hours. Look south about halfway up the sky about a half hour before local sunset for the half-lit moon.

Venus is still an early evening object and Jupiter is rapidly taking over in the early morning slot rising higher each morning followed by brightening Mars. Tiny Mercury is now sinking back toward the eastern horizon.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.