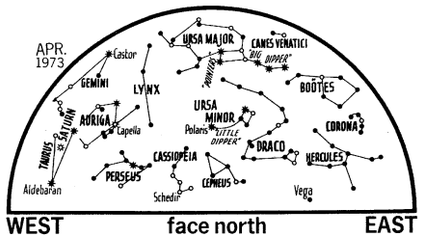
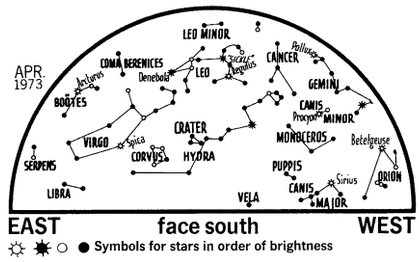
Springtime stars now visible





by James Stokley

The coming of the first full month of spring is reflected in the evening skies. During April, only a few of the characteristic winter constellations remain on view low in the west. Springtime groups have taken the prominent places they occupied a couple of months ago.

Ursa Major shines high in the north and there you can see the Big Dipper, now inverted. The pointers, indicating the direction of the polestar, Polaris, are toward the left. Ursa Major is at its best evening position of the year.

The name, of course, means "great bear," and that is how it was formerly portrayed. As we see the group on April evenings, the bear is inverted. But on autumn evenings, when it is below Polaris and near the horizon, he stands right side up.

The handle of the Big Dipper formed the bear's tail, although we know that bears do not have long tails. Probably the people in the valley of the Euphrates River who named it thousands of years ago were not familiar with bears.

Daily rotation of earth from west to east carries the stars in circles around the north pole of the sky, which is directly over the earth's North Pole and close to Polaris. Thus any star that is nearer to the pole than it is to the northern horizon never sets but is visible in the north on any clear night. Ursa Major is the most prominent of these "circumpolar" constellations. Some others are Ursa Minor, Cassiopeia, Cephus and Draco.

All are located on the accompanying maps. These maps show the sky as it looks about 10 p.m., local standard time, on the first of April; 9 p.m. on the 15th and 9 p.m. local daylight saving time on the 30th.

From regions farther north Ursa Major is prominent the year round and this led to the name we give that part of the world. The Greek word for bear is *arctos*; hence these are the arctic regions.

The seven stars that form the Big Dipper are even more familiar than the whole constellation and each has a special name. At the end of the handle is Alkaid or Benetnasch. Next is Mizar. Then come Alioth, Megrez, Pheoda, Merak and Dubhe. The last two are the pointers.

Although for us these stars outline a dipper, other countries use different names. To the English they form a plough, or Charles' Wain (wagon). American Indians called it a bear, but they were familiar with that animal and didn't give him an unbear-like tail. The bowl of the Dipper, to the Algonquins, was the bear, and the stars of the handle were three hunters pursuing him.

To the Arabs it was not a bear but a bier—a coffin with a corpse being carried to the grave. The last three stars were the mourners in the funeral procession. As they used paid mourners, some member of the family, perhaps the son of the deceased, followed at the end to see that they did a good job. Hence the two names of the last star: Alkaid and Benetnasch. These come from an Arabic phrase, *Kaid Banat al Naash*, meaning "the chief of the mourners."

It is only by chance that, from our part of the universe, these seven stars form a dipper. They are at considerably different distances and they are not all moving in the same direction so the figure is changing. □

CELESTIAL TIMETABLE

April	EST	
3	6:45 am	New moon
5	11:00 pm	Moon nearest, distance 226,700 miles
6	9:00 am	Mars passes south of Jupiter
7	2:00 pm	Moon passes north of Saturn
9	2:00 pm	Venus behind sun
	11:28 pm	Moon in first quarter
17	8:51 am	New moon
21	9:00 pm	Moon farthest, distance 251,800 miles
25	12:59 pm	Moon in last quarter
	midnight	Moon passes north of Jupiter
27	1:00 am	Moon passes north of Mars