

# Heavens Above - A Chronicle - 06 - January Nights

As mentioned in the Introduction Section, this is a collection of my columns that specifically relate to things best observed in the month of January. In most cases, they could also be observed in December and February at later or earlier times respectively.

## CONTENTS LIST FOR JANUARY NIGHTS

1. Hail the Hunter
2. Hare's Looking at You
3. New Year Smorgasbord
4. Happy 400th Birthday

January was a lean month for Heavens Above articles as the Chronicle didn't usually start column until very late January or early February. Many that were written for January were either date specific and have passed their 'use by' date or of a general nature not dependant on the month and therefore to be found in the General section.

### 1. Hail the Hunter

for 9th January 2001

One of the most easily recognised constellations is giving a good show this month. If you face North and look up high, you will see the familiar 'Saucepan'. That's not its real name of course. Throughout history, it has been known as The Great Hunter, The Giant, The Celestial Warrior. And Orion.

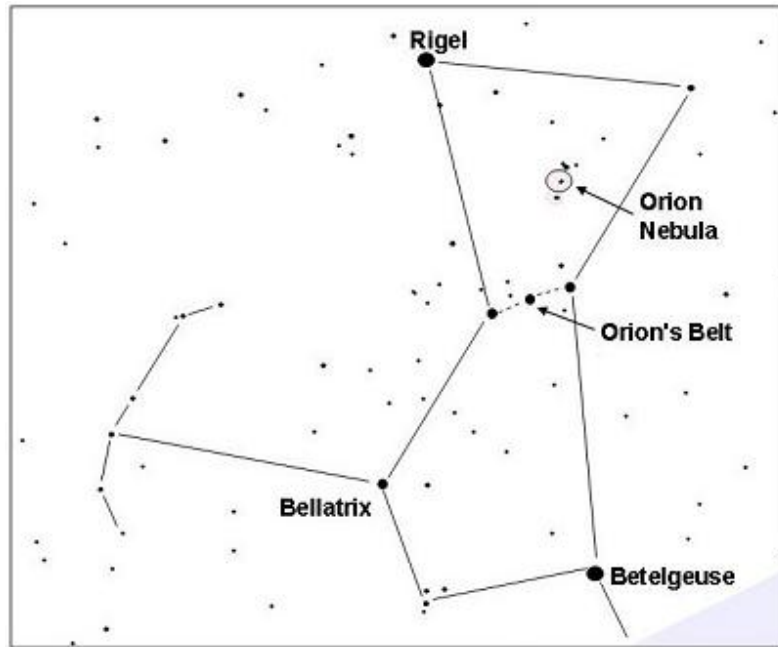
We 'Down Under' see Orion upside-down so it looks more like a saucepan than a hunter wielding a lethal weapon.

As the evening sky darkens and the stars begin to come out, the first stars of Orion you normally see are the white supergiant at the far top (Rigel –the Giant's Ankle), the red supergiant below the belt (Betelgeuse – the Armpit) and the three bright stars forming the famous Orion's Belt. These three stars actually have names. From left to right, may I introduce Mintaka, Alnilam and Alnitak. They have rated a mention by Tennison:

*"...those three stars of the airy Giant's zone, that glitter burnished by the frosty dark..."*

The fainter star to the top left of Betelgeuse also has a name – Bellatrix, which mean 'the warrior.'

So this overly familiar constellation is comprised of stars that were special enough for someone to name them. They are great material for trivia nights or boring parties.



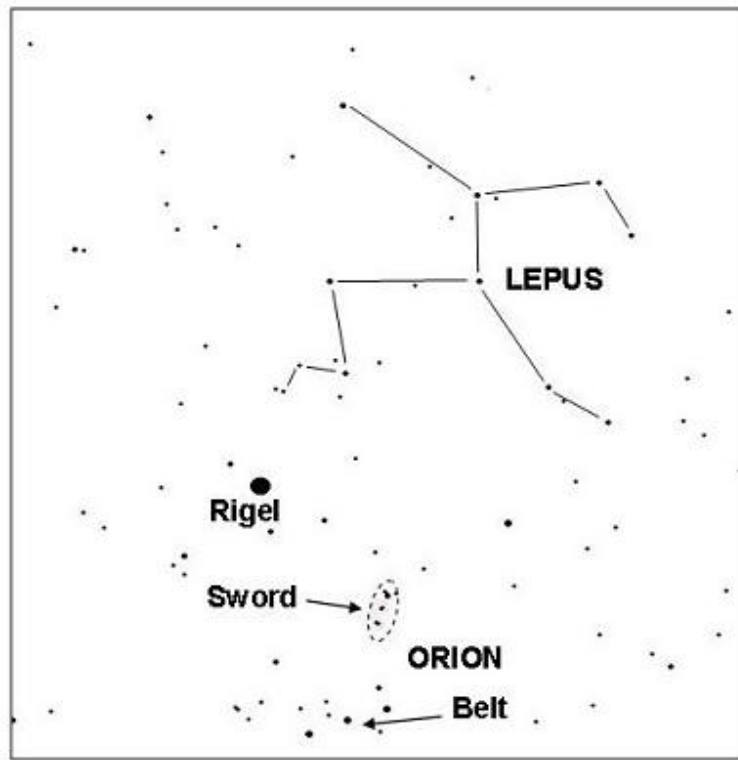
Of course no discussion on Orion would be complete without mentioning the magnificent Orion Nebula. This is to be found in the middle of the 'handle' – actually Orion's Sword. Even a pair of binoculars will reveal the hazy wisps of gas around the baby stars it gave birth to. In a small telescope, it is a staggering sight. Good hunting, Orion!

## 2. Hare's Looking at You

for 5th February 2002

Though not well known to laymen these days, this constellation has been hopping along beneath Orion's sandals since ancient Greek times.

Lepus, the Hare (not to be confused with Lupus the Wolf which is on the opposite side of the sky with Scorpius) can be found immediately to the south of Orion the Hunter, literally under his feet. Or in simpler terms, as you face north, directly above the handle of the Saucepan and the bright white star Rigel. Around 9 or 10 pm, it is almost directly overhead, immediately to the west of Sirius, the brightest star in the sky.



Lepus's stars are not very bright but still easily seen. They seem to form a distinct pattern. The Greeks saw it as a hare, or rabbit, resting at Orion's feet, a rather dangerous past-time as Orion's two dogs Canis Major and Canis Minor would have loved to make a meal of it. A case of hare today, gone tomorrow.

They were looking at it upside-down from the way we see Lepus. When facing north and joining the dots, I see a distinct shape of a man running from right to left, his arms flung out, his front knee and leg raised and his other leg pushing hard from behind. But then, I suppose it's all in how you join the dots.

Many cultures associate Lepus with the Moon, thinking they can see a hare, not a man in the Moon. Others believe Lepus lays eggs around Easter as it is usually high in the sky at that time. Hence the Easter Bunny.

Have a look – what can you see?

### 3. New Year Smorgasbord

for 5th February 2008

This is a great start to the year, with a plethora of planets and constellations on display. This month looking north you will see the 'saucepan' of Orion with its super-giant white and red stars Rigel and Betelgeuse and the Great Nebula in its 'handle'. Above and to the east will be Sirius, the sky's brightest star and a hand-span below Sirius will be Procyon, the Lesser Dog. Below it are the Gemini wins, Pollux and Castor.

To Orion's west is the Big-V of Taurus pointing westwards and the beautiful red star Aldebaran at the right top of the V. Below and left of the V is the star cluster Pleiades. Check it out with binoculars – stunning.

Below Orion you will see two bright stars about 3° apart. The lower is one tip of the bull's horn, Elnith. (The upper was the planet Mars, but only for that Year/month.)

Far to the east, the constellation Leo is rising, with its distinctive sickle shape under the white star Regulus. Happy New Year.

### 4. Happy 400th Birthday

for 3rd February 2009

Welcome to IYA2009. This year has been designated world-wide by UNESCO as The International Year of Astronomy. It marks 400 years since Galileo turned the world on its head, changing science and our idea of our place in the Universe forever by pointing his new telescope at the stars in 1609.

There will be an international effort with one objective: to expose as many as possible of the world's 6.8

billion citizens to the Universe's wonders.

In Sydney there will be lots of astronomy related events during the year. It is expected the press will give more attention than usual to news on the astronomy front. A special feature will be '100 Hours of Astronomy', when on April 2nd – 5th, a 100 hour around-the-clock and round-the-globe marathon will aim to have 100 million people look at the sky through a telescope for the first time. Wow!

Macarthur Astronomical Society will be involved in the 100 Hours event. It will also be conducting a number of other public star nights through the year. Watch for notices in the paper and on the MAS website for details and get involved.

Happy 400th.

(WATCH THIS SPACE FOR FUTURE JANUARY NIGHTS ARTICLES)

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