

The July 2024 Chippewa Valley Astronomy Update

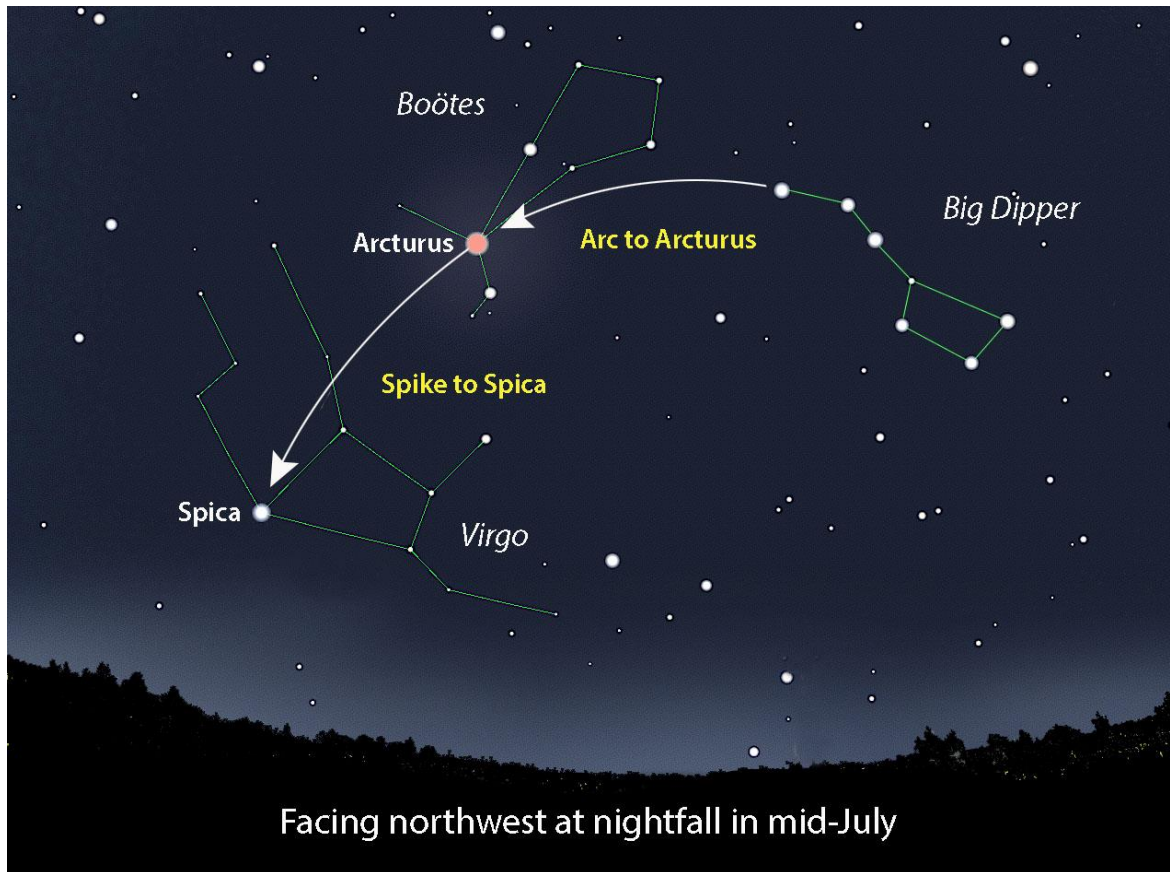


Figure caption: Part of the enjoyment of the night sky is learning to identify constellations and stars.

Image credit: Bob King (Astro Bob)

Stargazing the Northern Sky

Essay by Kevin Litten

Most people can point out the Big Dipper. The Big Dipper is an asterism, a smaller part of the constellation Ursa Major – the Big Bear. The two outside stars of the ladle, not the handle, point towards Polaris, the North Star. We say point towards because it misses the star by a proverbial mile yet it gets your eyes looking in the correct direction. Once you find Polaris you know which way is North.

Polaris is in the constellation Ursa Minor or the little bear. Polaris is the last star on the end of the bear's tail or the handle of the little dipper.

Here in Wisconsin the Big Dipper is up all night, all year long. If you are overwintering in Florida the Big Dipper will scoot beneath the trees. The constellation Cassiopeia, the queen, has a bright W shaped asterism that is easy to spot. Between Cassiopeia and the Little Dipper where Polaris lies is the constellation Cepheus, the king. The 5 brightest stars of Cepheus form the shape of a steep

roofed house. If you take the top roof star of Cepheus, known as Errai, and the brightest star on the end of Cassiopeia's W, known as Caph or β , draw a line along those two stars, and it will take you very nicely to Polaris; but not exactly either.

The handle of the Big Dipper forms a nice arc. If you follow that arc about twice as long as the arc itself, it will take you to a bright star known as Arcturus. Out of that comes the rhyme "Take the arc to Arcturus." You were wondering how astronomers find their way around? Sometimes we use rhymes.

Arcturus is the brightest star in the constellation Bootes, the herdsman. Bootes looks like a kite with tiny feet. There are many notable things to look at in Bootes yet it is also notable for having a void. This gives cosmologists something to write papers about, so maybe it is a good thing.

From Arcturus, you can "Spike to Spica," the brightest star in the constellation Virgo, the virgin. Virgo contains a huge number of galaxies. Possibly keeping the cosmos in balance? More papers to write.

--Kevin Litten is a member of the Chippewa Valley Astronomical Society