

## April 2026 Chippewa Valley Astronomy Update



Caption: The 1825 hand colored etching by Sidney Hall “Leo Major and Leo Minor” shows the constellation Leo and the lesser known constellation Leo Minor. This was plate 20 of a set of 32 astronomical star-chart cards used by stargazers 200 years ago. Image credit: Public Domain.

### Wildcats in the Night Sky by Kevin Litten

Woodcats, also known as European Wildcats, will be reintroduced into the British countryside sometime next year. Except for a few places in the Scottish Highlands where the wildcats are critically endangered, the cats have been missing for over 100 years.

There are cats all over the world. They look much the same. Some are considerably larger than others. I would be well spooked if house cats were twice their size. If they were my size or larger – cripes.

There are many scary things portrayed in the sky. Bears have been up there since prehistoric times. There is a sea monster and there are lions.

The constellation Leo, or the lion, is one of the twelve zodiac constellations, the constellations that the sun will rise or set in. Many consider it the most prominent constellation in the spring sky. It is easy to pick out with nine bright stars and an asterism known as “the sickle” which looks like a backwards question mark. Leo is not within the Milky Way’s plane and there are no globular or open clusters to be seen. It makes up for this by having numerous bright galaxies easily visible with a small telescope.

Most observers see Leo as sitting with its front paws extended. In constellation drawings it walks upright with one or both of its hind legs extended. In a listing of our modern International Astronomical Union (IAU) constellations there is a little leo (Leo Minor) just above the big one.

Of the notable stars in Leo, I’d like to point out three. Regulus is the brightest. It is a quadruple star system of bluish white stars. It appears very bright yet it is only the 21<sup>st</sup> brightest star we see; about 80 light years away. Just above it and not nearly as bright is  $\eta$  (eta) Leonis, a third magnitude star positioned on the center edge of the lion’s chest. Eta Leonis is nearly 1,300 light years away. One of the farthest stars visible to the naked eye. The rest of the visible stars in Leo are close by with none being further than 300 light years away. One of Leo’s stars, visible only with the help of a telescope, is designated “Wolf 359”. A wolf inside a lion? Astronomy can be like that. Fortunately it also goes by CN Leonis; a variable star, Wolf 359 is the fourth closest star to Earth about 8 light years away.

People who lived their lives only seeing small cats were well able to imagine a large feline. The thought of a big cat several times their body size must have frightened our ancestors. So that they might not forget, there was a lion up in the sky to remind them.

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