By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

Now let’s see, where was I? Oh yes, the Winter Triangle and the Winter Hexagon.

These two are not actual constellations in the normal sense of the word. They are asterisms, patterns made up using stars outside of normal constellation usage.

For example, the Big and Little Dippers, the Summer Triangle, and the Northern Cross are all asterisms.

Go outside at about 8:30 p.m. local time and look southeast for the stars of Orion, the Hunter. The four bright stars marking his shoulders and knees and the three stars for his belt will be very obvious.

Orion is our starting place. The bright blue star marking his left knee is Rigel. From there go up and slightly left for bright red Aldebaran in the constellation Taurus the Bull.

Aldebaran is in the middle of the Hyades star cluster–the “V” shape making up the face and horns of the bull, looking like it could be the bull’s eye.

Next, go left to another bright star, Capella in Auriga, the Charioteer. Auriga is sort of an odd shaped, almost-circle of stars with Capella on the upper left side.

Next left and down for Gemini, a rectangle of stars for the body and the “twins,” Castor and Pollux for the heads then down and right for Procyon.

Procyon is the star marking Canis Minor, the Little Dog. Don’t look for any constellation stars, the entire constellation is just two stars. Don’t ask, it’s a Greek thing.

Now, right again to the big dog, Canis Major with very bright Sirius as the eye. Although they are below the horizon, he stars of Canis Major do almost look like a dog. Pay careful attention to Sirius.

At this time of year it is very low on the horizon and could be twinkling furiously with many colors. For a better view use binoculars to enhance the twinkling effect. It is awesome.

Next up to blue Rigel, the left knee of Orion where we started.

As for the triangle, use Betelgeuse, the right shoulder star of Orion, Sirius and Rigel.

SKY WATCH: This is going to be a toughie, these are all morning events. Tomorrow morning, Dec. 30, be outside an hour before sunrise looking southeast for a slender crescent Moon. It will be just to the right of very bright Venus, and on Friday it will be below the planet.

If you are functioning on the morning of Jan. 1, the Moon will be three degrees to the right of elusive Mercury and Sunday morning, Jan. 2, an excruciatingly slender Moon will be below Mercury. Binoculars will be helpful in finding it. This will be a good time to put that telescope you got for Christmas to use.

Tiny Mercury will be around for about the next week, just remember, it is very, very low in the horizon so get away from anything that obstructs your view east.