

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

I don't necessarily want to keep talking about Orion, but it is kind of like the elephant in the living room, it is awful hard to ignore.

These winter evenings Orion is located due south at about 9 p.m. MST. The hourglass shape of two broad shoulders and two knees with a belt and sword hanging from it can't be missed.

Even if you have never found another constellation, Orion will be no problem to locate—so go out and take a look. Even from a light polluted urban area Orion is conspicuous.

Most of the stars of Orion are located relatively close to us. The Sun is located along the inside edge of the Orion arm of our galaxy. But it really isn't an arm as much as a spur off of one of the larger arms.

It is between the Sagittarius and Perseus arms which puts us in the vicinity of a lot of stars.

I have heard people comment that the stars seem brighter in winter, well, they are. There is an especially bright grouping in the southeast.

In addition to the stars of Orion there is the brightest star in the night sky, Sirius, the brightest star in Canis Major, the big dog. If you really want a good view of Sirius look in the southeast about a half-hour after sunset.

Because we are looking through an exceptionally thick layer of Earth's atmosphere Sirius will be twinkling at a furious rate. Reds, blues, and whites. The experience is elevated when using binoculars.

Other bright stars in the area, in addition to the stars of Orion, are Procyon, the brightest star in Canis Minor, the little dog, to the left of Sirius. Aldebaran in Taurus, Capella in Auriga, Castor and Pollux in Gemini.

If those all sound familiar, we discussed them a couple of weeks ago in our look at the Winter Hexagon and the Winter Triangle.

Not to mention the winter Milky Way runs up the right side (on the left as you are looking at it) of Orion adding lots of Messier objects to look for.

Ok, now for a real challenge. Let's try and catch one of Jupiter's moons as it comes out of Jupiter's shadow, from being eclipsed as it were.

On Friday, Feb. 4, Jupiter's moon Ganymede will come out of Jupiter's shadow at about 6:12 p.m. MST as seen from southwest Nebraska. Binoculars will work, but for a really good look, power up that new telescope you got for Christmas and put it to work.

The four major moons of Jupiter are Callisto, the outermost of the four, which will be the top moon, Ganymede is next and you will see it when it comes out of the shadow.

Io and Europa are the next two in order and are below the planet. All four run in a straight line from above to below Jupiter.

The process won't last long, about 10 minutes, so be ready and be looking.

SKY WATCH: Third quarter Moon tonight. About an hour before sunrise on Friday, Jan. 28, look in the east for a slender Moon about six degrees above and right of Antares, the brightest star in Scorpius. The scorpion is a summer constellation.

Even here in the dead of winter the promise of warmer times are showing above the horizon.

By mid-February another harbinger of summer, Sagittarius, will be above the eastern horizon.

Early on Jan. 29, the Moon will cozy up with Venus. The next morning look for the Moon on the other side of the bright planet.