

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

With the advent of spring the evenings are warming up, supposedly, making it possible to stay out a little longer for observing. However, with the change to Daylight Saving Time the Sun is setting later which has the effect of shortening our observing time.

For example, the day has lengthened a half hour since the first of the month.

As my mother used to say, "What one hand gives, the other takes away."

Anyway, the best time to start observing is about an hour after local sunset which for southwest Nebraska is now 7:07 p.m. MDT.

One thing you might want to observe is Orion. It is the focus of the annual Globe at Night star-count survey.

Start by pointing your favorite web browser to www.globeatnight.org and print off the observing charts.

Then go outside, find Orion (hint: it is in the southwest sky now) and see which chart matches what you see. Then you can report your observation on line and join thousands of others around the world checking on the various and probably increasing levels of light pollution.

The survey is going on from now until April 15.

Another place you might want to look is high in the northeast for our old friend the Big Dipper.

You might remember that the Big Dipper is not a constellation, but is an asterism, a star pattern that is part of a larger constellation but is recognizable as a star pattern unto itself.

This time of year it is standing almost straight up on its tail with the dipper portion extending off to the left side.

It is possible to use the stars of the Big Dipper to find three other constellations in the sky.

We all know about using the two outer stars of the dipper to go down and left to find Polaris, the North Star. Polaris is the end star in the handle of Ursa Major's companion, Ursa Minor, the Little Dipper.

How about if we reverse that point direction and instead of going left we go right. If we go a little further than the distance to Polaris we will end up right in the middle of Leo, the Lion's back.

Leo has the backwards question mark for a head and a triangle of stars for a back end.

Ok, what about the third. Okay, back to the dipper. Find where the handle joins the dipper part. Follow the arch of the handle down and right to Arcturus.

Arcturus is the brightest star in the constellation Bootes (pronounced BO-o-tees). It looks sort of like a kite which is lying along the horizon extending to the left of Arcturus.

Not a bad evening's work even if I say so myself.

SKY WATCH: New moon Sunday, April 3. There will be a nice trio in the early morning hours tomorrow, Thursday, March 31. Look in the southeast about a half hour before sunrise to find a very slender crescent moon parked near two planets. Venus just down and to the right of the moon and dim Neptune further to the right of the moon. Venus and Neptune will almost be in the same field of binocular view with Venus on the extreme lower left side and Neptune on the extreme upper right side.

Sunday, ringed Saturn will be at opposition, or on the opposite side of Earth from the Sun. Being at opposition it will be at its closest for the year and up all night from sunset to sunrise. This will be a good opportunity to break out that new telescope you got for Christmas and take a look.

After 9 p.m. MDT will be a good time to look. The yellow colored planet is located in Virgo, the Maiden just above and slightly right of Virgo's brightest star Spica.

NEXT WEEK: More astronomical blathering.