An old friend—the dipper

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The last two objects on our easy-to-find, quick-view list are the star Capella in the constellation Auriga, the Charioteer, and one of our very best old friends, the Big Dipper.

Capella is also known as the “Goat Star” due to its association with three small nearby stars in a small triangle (Almaaz, and Hoedus I and II) which are called “The Kids.”

It is a very bright star–the third brightest in the Northern Hemisphere–and easy to locate. Go outside to your favorite dark-sky place about an hour after local sunset and look either east or south. In either case Auriga will be almost directly overhead.

If you are facing east Auriga will be above Gemini and to the left of Taurus and Orion with Capella located on the top side of the almost-circular constellation.

If you are facing south Auriga will again be almost overhead to the right of Gemini, above Orion and Taurus, with Capella on the upper right side of the constellation.

There are three very nice star clusters that were charted by Charles Messier in his hunt for things that were not comets. M36 and M38 can be located inside the circle of stars making up the constellation and the third, M37, just below it–if you are looking east. If you are looking south, M37, will be on the lower left side.

They are easily accessible with binoculars.

Now for the final quick-find object, the Big Dipper. The Big Dipper is not really a constellation, it is an asterism, a group of stars placed in a recognizable shape or pattern.

So, what is so noticeable about the Big Dipper now?

At this particular time of year, the Big Dipper is standing upright on its handle with the dipper part above. If you look a little to the left you will find the Little Dipper also almost straight up and down only reversed in its position.

It its case, the dipper is down and the handle is sticking straight up.So, take 10 minutes, run outside and take a look for our quick-find objects, then quick back inside where it is warm.

Now, we were going to say something about comets—there are two comets approaching the Sun which may, or may not, provide some spectacular viewing in March and November. However, that remains to be seen as will be discussed next week.

SKY WATCH: First quarter moon, Sunday, Feb. 17. By now you have heard about the small asteroid that will come whizzing past Earth on Friday, Feb. 15.

While there is no danger if it hitting Earth, it will pass close enough to be inside the orbit of lots of geostationary satellites like the weather and communication satellites. It is very small and will be traveling much faster than a rifle bullet so finding it will be difficult to impossible.

However, if you are in a very dark-sky location are are looking in the area of the Big Dipper where the dipper joins the handle between 9pm and 10 p.m. MST with a good pair of binoculars, you might see something moving.

NEXT WEEK: Astronomy 101 class, a quick lesson about comets and more astronomical blathering.