

Check Your Learning

The Moon moves in the sky relative to the background stars (in addition to moving with the stars as a result of Earth's rotation.) Go outside at night and note the position of the Moon relative to nearby stars. Repeat the observation a few hours later. How far has the Moon moved? (For reference, the diameter of the Moon is about 0.5° .) Based on your estimate of its motion, how long will it take for the Moon to return to the position relative to the stars in which you first observed it?

Answer:

The speed of the moon is $0.5^\circ/1 \text{ h}$. To move a full 360° , the moon needs 720 h: $\frac{0.5^\circ}{1 \text{ h}} = \frac{360^\circ}{720 \text{ h}}$. Dividing 720 h by the conversion factor of 24 h/day reveals the lunar cycle is about 30 days.

The individual paths of the Moon and planets in the sky all lie close to the ecliptic, although not exactly on it. This is because the paths of the planets about the Sun, and of the Moon about Earth, are all in nearly the same plane, as if they were circles on a huge sheet of paper. The planets, the Sun, and the Moon are thus always found in the sky within a narrow 18-degree-wide belt, centered on the ecliptic, called the **zodiac** (Figure 2.6). (The root of the term “zodiac” is the same as that of the word “zoo” and means a collection of animals; many of the patterns of stars within the zodiac belt reminded the ancients of animals, such as a fish or a goat.)

How the planets appear to move in the sky as the months pass is a combination of their actual motions plus the motion of Earth about the Sun; consequently, their paths are somewhat complex. As we will see, this complexity has fascinated and challenged astronomers for centuries.

Constellations

The backdrop for the motions of the “wanderers” in the sky is the canopy of stars. If there were no clouds in the sky and we were on a flat plain with nothing to obstruct our view, we could see about 3000 stars with the unaided eye. To find their way around such a multitude, the ancients found groupings of stars that made some familiar geometric pattern or (more rarely) resembled something they knew. Each civilization found its own patterns in the stars, much like a modern Rorschach test in which you are asked to discern patterns or pictures in a set of inkblots. The ancient Chinese, Egyptians, and Greeks, among others, found their own groupings—or constellations—of stars. These were helpful in navigating among the stars and in passing their star lore on to their children.

You may be familiar with some of the old star patterns we still use today, such as the Big Dipper, Little Dipper, and Orion the hunter, with his distinctive belt of three stars (Figure 2.8). However, many of the stars we see are not part of a distinctive star pattern at all, and a telescope reveals millions of stars too faint for the eye to see. Therefore, during the early decades of the 20th century, astronomers from many countries decided to establish a more formal system for organizing the sky.

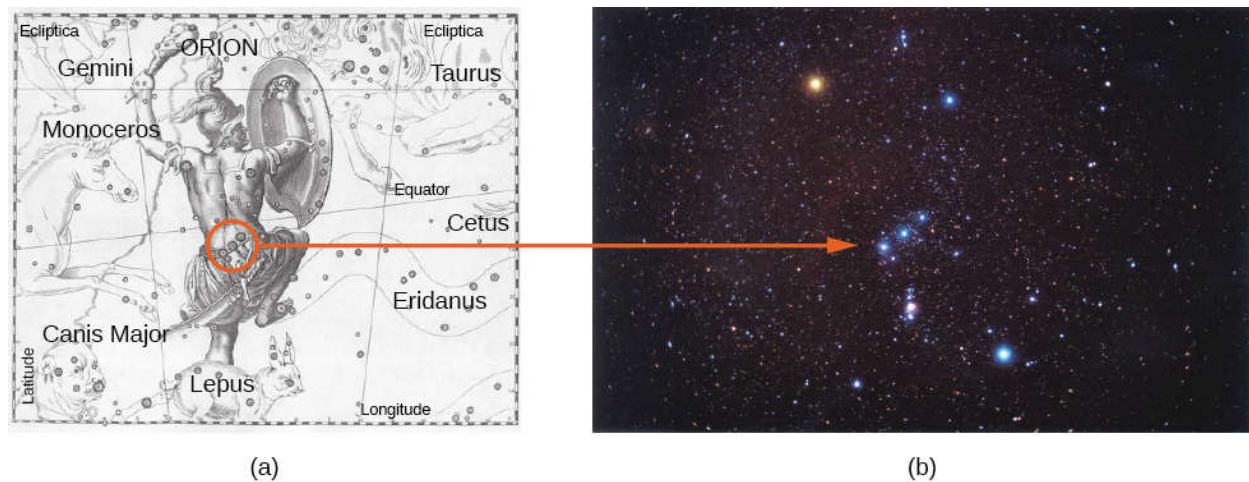


Figure 2.8 Orion. (a) The winter constellation of Orion, the hunter, is surrounded by neighboring constellations, as illustrated in the seventeenth-century atlas by Hevelius. (b) A photograph shows the Orion region in the sky. Note the three blue stars that make up the belt of the hunter. The bright red star above the belt denotes his armpit and is called Betelgeuse (pronounced “Beetel-juice”). The bright blue star below the belt is his foot and is called Rigel. (credit a: modification of work by Johannes Hevelius; b: modification of work by Matthew Spinelli)

Today, we use the term *constellation* to mean one of 88 sectors into which we divide the sky, much as the United States is divided into 50 states. The modern boundaries between the constellations are imaginary lines in the sky running north–south and east–west, so that each point in the sky falls in a specific constellation, although, like the states, not all constellations are the same size. All the constellations are listed in [Appendix L](#). Whenever possible, we have named each modern constellation after the Latin translations of one of the ancient Greek star patterns that lies within it. Thus, the modern constellation of Orion is a kind of box on the sky, which includes, among many other objects, the stars that made up the ancient picture of the hunter. Some people use the term *asterism* to denote an especially noticeable star pattern within a constellation (or sometimes spanning parts of several constellations). For example, the Big Dipper is an asterism within the constellation of Ursa Major, the Big Bear.

Students are sometimes puzzled because the constellations seldom resemble the people or animals for which they were named. In all likelihood, the Greeks themselves did not name groupings of stars because they looked like actual people or subjects (any more than the outline of Washington state resembles George Washington). Rather, they named sections of the sky in honor of the characters in their mythology and then fit the star configurations to the animals and people as best they could.

LINK TO LEARNING



This [website about objects in the sky \(https://openstaxcollege.org/l/30heavensabove\)](https://openstaxcollege.org/l/30heavensabove) allows users to construct a detailed sky map showing the location and information about the Sun, Moon, planets, stars, constellations, and even satellites orbiting Earth. Begin by setting your observing location using the option in the menu in the upper right corner of the screen.

- Explain how the zodiacal constellations are different from the other constellations.
- What is an asterism? Can you name an example?
- What does it mean when an astronomer says, “I saw a comet in Orion last night?”