

Simple Winter Star-chart

You may have seen other star-charts before that were a confusing mass of dots and lines and Greek letters, and you have to hold them over your head to use them. Our star charts here are far simpler and have fewer stars. You can just hold these up in front of you when you're facing the appropriate direction and look up!

Looking North

The plough is perhaps the most easily recognised group of stars in the northern sky and it is a very useful 'skymark'. The plough is always above the horizon and allows us to find Polaris, or the Pole Star. If you imagine the plough as a saucepan, then you can follow the two stars furthest from the handle, up towards another not-particularly-bright star. This star is Polaris. If you are looking at this star, you are facing north.

On the other side of Polaris is a W of stars (or an M depending on which way up it happens to be; the stars appear to rotate anti-clockwise round Polaris once every 24 hours). This is the constellation of Cassiopeia. These stars in the northern sky are the same all year round, so you will always be able to find them on a clear night.

Looking South

The stars in the southern sky change as the seasons change, the winter skies being perhaps the most exciting, and as it's nice and dark for longer, they're easier to see too! One of the best recognised constellations is in the sky, Orion the Hunter, with his Belt. Use the Belt to find other shapes by following the line of the belt right, till you come to a V-shape of stars - Taurus' head - and then a small group of faint stars - the Seven Sisters, or Pleiades cluster. If it's really dark and clear, look for Orions nebula, a faint smudge on his sword, where new stars are being formed before your eyes! Follow the line of the belt left, and you come to Sirius, the Dog Star, brightest in our night sky.

What Next?

There are, of course, far more stars to be seen than just these, but if you can find these objects reliably, then you can use them to find your way round other constellations too. Astronomical magazines publish monthly sky-charts with much more detail than our star-chart including the current position of the planets etc. but you'll find it helpful to master ours first before progressing onto those. You can also find sky-charts and a range of other astronomical resources at www.heavens-above.com.

Dark Sky Scotland

The Dark Sky Scotland project is the first nation-wide astronomy project, aiming to increase the public awareness of astronomy, science and technology. A series of events is currently underway with teacher training workshops and a range of fun activities for young and old.

Activities include the Starlab inflatable planetarium, comet-making demonstrations, meteorite-handling, make-and-take family activities and talks on modern astronomy from actual working astronomers, not to mention stargazing if the weather allows. To find out more about the project, visit our website at www.darkskscotland.org.uk

