

THE
NIGHT
SKY

Orion the Mighty Hunter

By James Durbano
Photo By Stellarium



If you can tolerate the cold, the star-studded winter sky is a marvel to behold. There are so many bright stars to look at on winter nights, it's difficult to focus on just a few, but I recommend you start with what is most certainly the easiest of all constellations to identify – Orion.

Orion is an ancient constellation and is known as The Hunter. Unlike many constellations, Orion really does look like what it represents. When looking up at these stars, it doesn't take much imagination to see a human figure with a sword raised high in one hand and a shield in the other. Sometimes Orion is depicted with a club in his hand, not a sword, and a lion skin in his other hand, not a shield, but however you imagine him; he is certainly a dominant figure in the winter sky.

When looking at Orion, your eye will undoubtedly be drawn to a trio of bright stars lined up in the middle of the constellation. These stars are known as Orion's Belt. You will not find three stars this bright, lined up in such close proximity anywhere else in the sky, making Orion both conspicuous and memorable.

In addition to the belt stars, there are two more bright stars located above the belt. These stars mark Orion's shoulders. The fiery red star on the left is a red supergiant star called Betelgeuse, which will eventually explode as a supernova, possibly in the next million years. Below Orion's Belt are two more bright stars, marking Orion's knees. The brilliant blue star on the right is a blue supergiant star called Rigel, which is nearly 50,000 times brighter than the sun, making it one of the most luminous stars known.

If you've never seen Orion, now is the time to get outside and enjoy it. Whether you view it from your cold backyard or your neighbour's hot tub, I'm sure you will agree that Orion is truly a remarkable constellation. To find Orion, go outside in mid-January at 10:30 p.m. and look in the southern sky, about halfway between the horizon and the point straight above your head. By mid-February, you can find Orion in the exact same location two hours earlier. ■

James Durbano is an astronomer who specializes in education and public outreach activities. He has been keeping an eye on the sky for more than 25 years and enjoys sharing the wonders of the universe with others. He is the founder of the Big Sky Astronomical Society and operates a small business called Astronomer 4 Hire.