

Mountain Skies

May and June, 2000

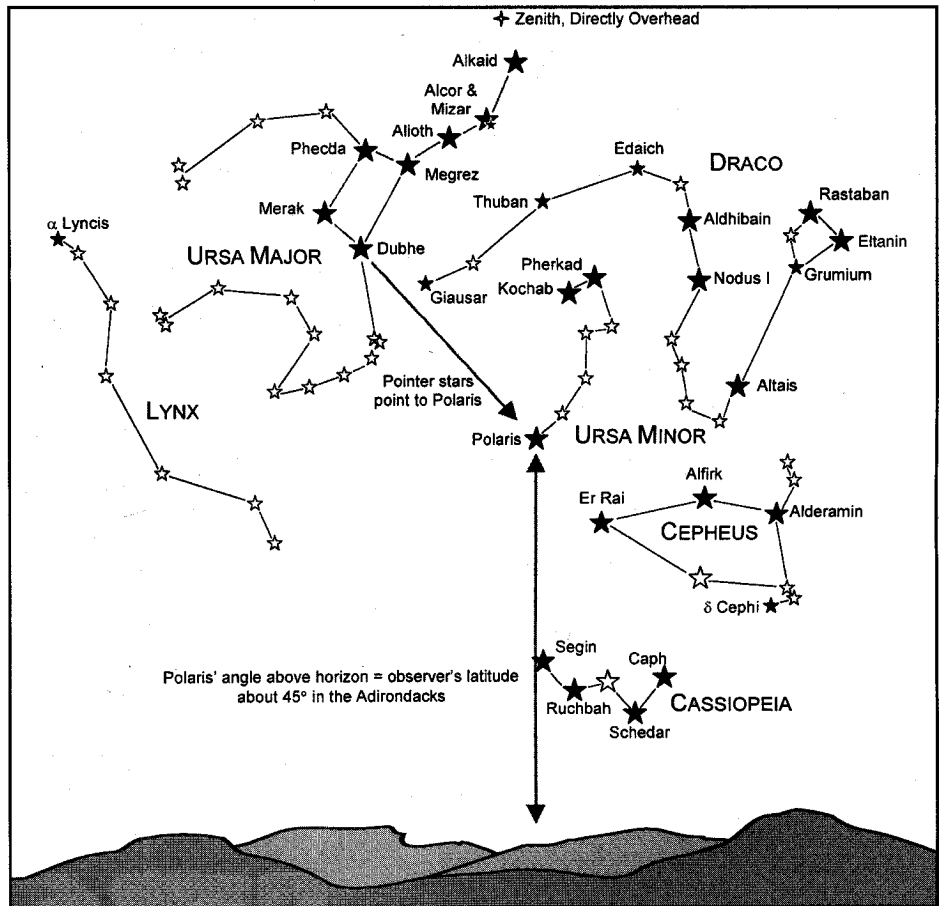
The Celts celebrate the first day of summer on May 1, Beltane. It's the second cross-quarter day of the year and half-way between the Vernal Equinox and the Summer Solstice, June 21. Bathing in the dew of Beltane is believed to give one lasting beauty. At this time of year, the days are still lengthening rapidly. Orion stands on the horizon at dusk in early May as though saluting farewell, then rapidly plunges behind the sun to reappear in the pre-dawn skies of autumn.

As May begins, Jupiter is a mere 3° west of Saturn and closing. But the sun is only 4½° west of Jupiter and closing in on the pair even faster! The sun will pass the pair of giants so that their conjunction will occur on the west side of the sun in our sky . . . making it visible before dawn instead of after sunset. However, the planets rise at 4:50 a.m., a mere half hour before the sun, and will be fairly difficult to spot in the twilight brightness unless you have a low eastern horizon. Saturn will also be less than 2° southeast of this close pair, but the conjunction will be nearly impossible to see with the sun only 7° east and rising only thirteen minutes after Jupiter at 5:33 a.m.

Mars continues to linger in the evening sky, 16° east of the sun and 4° south of the Pleiades as May begins. The sun is slowly gaining on Mars, however. During this time, Mercury zips out from behind the sun toward its greatest eastern elongation on June 9, when it will be 24° east of the sun and setting almost two hours after the sun at 10:33 p.m. This presents a wonderful opportunity to observe this mercurial planet. On its way east of the sun, Mercury passes 1° NNW (to the right in the sky) of Mars on May 19. In this conjunction, Mercury will be the brighter of the two planets due to Mars' great distance from Earth. On July 1, the sun will finally catch Mars in our sky, and Mars will move into the morning sky, where it will brighten and move away from the sun as Earth starts to catch up to Mars once again.

Young moon

One beautiful sight that is best observed in spring is the very young moon. Because of the angle between Earth's



axis (about which celestial objects rise and set) and the plane of Earth's orbit, the ecliptic (along which the sun, moon, and planets are found), the angle between the horizon and the ecliptic varies through the year. The moon moves about 12° per day along the ecliptic in its orbit (360° in about 30 days). In spring, this motion is almost straight up from the horizon at sunset, making the young crescent moon quite high in the sky and setting long enough after the sun for twilight to fade significantly. This makes the thin crescent easier to spot than in the fall when the moon's motion along the ecliptic is closer to parallel to the horizon so that it sets very soon after the sun in spite of being far from it on the ecliptic. At dawn, the seasons for spotting the waning crescent moon are reversed, with autumn being the best

time to spot the old moon.

The moon is new May 4, so look for it on the evening of May 5, when it will be 15° above the horizon just after sunset and be only 4% illuminated. The crescent will be quite thin, but the rest of the moon should be visible in Earthshine, the light reflected onto it by the almost fully illuminated Earth (from the moon's perspective). On June 2, the new moon occurs at 8:15 a.m. Since the sun will be closer to the summer solstice, when the ecliptic rises at 45° from the horizon, the crescent moon may not be visible until the 4th or 5th.

Great Bear and Dragon

In the starry sky, this is a good time to turn north, as the Great Bear and the Dragon are high in the sky. It's an odd thing that many northern cultures

across the world have seen Ursa Major as a bear with a long tail represented by the handle of the Big Dipper, yet bears across the world have short tails. The Greek mythology of the northern bears is a tragic story of blaming the victim. Callisto, a beautiful young worshipper of Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt, was raped by Jupiter, the King of the Gods. Callisto had vowed virginity as a devotee of Artemis, and the rape broke her vow, though she had fought hard against Jupiter, who had appeared to her as Artemis to win her confidence. Thus Callisto was banished from the followers of Artemis. She gave birth to a son, Arcas, in the forest. Jupiter's spouse, Juno, discovered this and turned Callisto into a bear as punishment. When Arcas was grown, he ventured into the forest, where Callisto saw him and ran to hug him, forgetting that she was a bear. Arcas, thinking he was being attacked by this bear, drew an arrow to shoot her and set his dogs on her. Jupiter witnessed this and in his belated compassion for Callisto, snatched both her and Arcas up into the sky, where Callisto is the Great Bear and Arcas the Little Bear.

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listo is a headless bear in a bright sky! Ursa Minor is much harder to see, and even the Little Dipper only emerges in a dark sky. Polaris, the pole star which currently marks the north celestial pole, the sky's axis of rotation, is at the end of the handle of the Little Dipper, and the end of the Little Bear's tail. To find it, follow the pointer stars at the end of the Big Dipper's bowl, Merak (MEE-rack) and Dubhe (DUBB-ee). At the end of the bowl of the Little Dipper are Pherkad (FER-cad) and Kochab (KO-cab) are fairly bright and easy to pick out. To find them, swing from Polaris back toward the handle of the Big Dipper. The other four stars of the Little Dipper are quite faint and hard to see, though once you know where they are, averted vision

(look out of the side of your eye) will make them visible.

The Dragon, Draco (DRAY-ko), winds between the two bears, where he was thrown by Minerva in the war between the old Titanic gods and the Olympic gods. Thuban (THOO-ban) is a very notable star in Draco since it was the pole star when the pyramids were being built. A shaft of the Great Pyramid that is incredibly straight and at an odd angle is thought to have been a shaft allowing the Pharaoh's spirit to journey to the pole. The placement of the pyramids on the plain of Giza is also thought to reflect the constellation of Orion. For more on that story, check out the "Orion Mystery" at <<http://ds.dial.pipex.com/ritson/quest/orion/gizagif.htm>>.

Another faint constellation high in the northern sky at this time of year is Lynx, where a King Lynx was cast into the sky as punishment for trying to take credit for a gift of food to the people from Ceres, the Goddess of Agriculture, in a time of famine. To teach the King humility, he is made of stars so faint that only one with the eyes of a Lynx can see him—a good test for eyes and dark Adirondack skies!

—Aileen O'Donoghue

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