

Stargazing planispheres



All right stargazers! It's time to get out your planispheres and set them for mid-August at 10 p.m. Grab a red flashlight and a comfy lawn chair, some bug spray and a cool beverage of your choice, and prepare to study the summer night sky!

What? No planisphere? Well, first let me explain what that is: it's a star wheel. It's a nifty little device that allows you to set the date and time you would like to observe, then it shows you in a window (actually an opening in the cardboard or plastic) what you will observe once you look up.

If you want to get out there right away, and have no planisphere, I can help you to build a star map in your mind. I'll guide you on a "star walk," filling in some information along the way.

First, find north. Start with the Big Dipper. It's big and easy to find: a four star cup with a three star handle attached. It will appear low on the horizon (see map) a little to the west of north. Many of us know to use the two outermost cup stars to make a line that points out the North Star, Polaris. The Big Dipper, I must point out, is not a constellation. It is something we call an asterism, a recognizable shape that is part of a larger constellation. The Big Dipper belongs to Ursa major, the Big Bear. The star Polaris is called the North

Star because it sits directly above Earth's North Pole, and therefore appears to not move at all as all other stars rise and set through the night. Polaris is the end of the handle of the Little Dipper. Just to make things confusing, the Little Dipper is a constellation, also known as Ursa minor, or the Little Bear.

A myth about these bears explains that their tails are so long because they were thrown into the night sky. Some braves had discovered the bears stealing food, so to punish them they grabbed their stubby tails and twirled the bears around and around till they flung them into the sky.

As you stay up late on a still late summer night, you may notice something unique about the northern skies: the stars in this part of the sky don't set –instead they circle the pole star. Because of this, we know these as the "circumpolar constellations." Happy stargazing! 🗺️

–Lisa Daly