

The Big Dipper or Plough in Ursa Major Constellation

The Big Dipper (US) or the Plough (UK) is an asterism consisting of seven bright stars of the constellation Ursa Major, six of them are of second magnitude and one, Megrez, of third magnitude. Four define a "bowl" or "body" and three define a "handle" or "head".

It is recognized as a distinct grouping in many cultures.

WESTERN ASTRONOMY

The name "Bear" is Homeric, and apparently native to Greece, while the "Wain" tradition is Mesopotamian. Book XVIII of Homer's Iliad mentions it as "the Bear". In Latin, these seven stars were known as the "Seven Oxen" (from septem triones). The classical mythographer identified the "Bear" as the nymph Callisto, changed into a she-bear by Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus.

In Ireland and the United Kingdom, this pattern is known as the Plough. The symbol of the Starry Plough has been used as a political symbol by Irish Republican and left wing movements.

Former names include the Great Wain (i.e., wagon) or Butcher's Cleaver. In German it is known as the "Great Wagon" (Großer Wagen) and, less often, the "Great Bear" (Großer Bär). In Scandinavia, it is known by variations of "Charles's Wagon" (Karlavagnen), but also the "Great Bear" (Stora Björn). In Dutch, its official name is the "Great Bear" (Grote Beer), but it is popularly known as the "Saucepan" (Steelpannetje). In Italian, too, it is called the "Great Wagon" (Grande Carro).

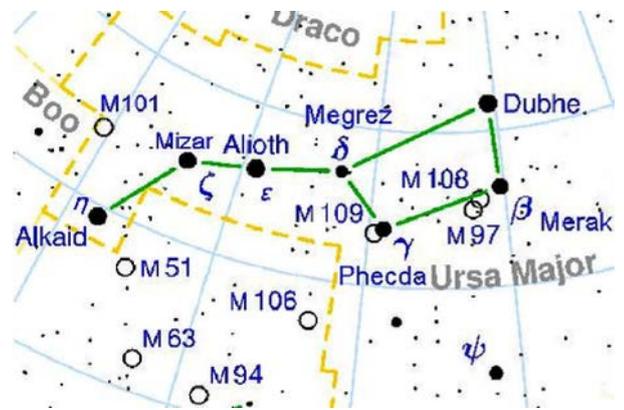
Ursa Major is a constellation in the northern sky, whose associated mythology likely dates back into prehistory. Its Latin name means "greater she-bear", standing as a reference to and in direct contrast with nearby Ursa Minor, the lesser bear. In antiquity, it was one of the original 48 constellations listed by Ptolemy, and is now the third largest constellation of the 88 modern constellations.

Ursa Major is primarily known from the asterism of its main seven relatively bright stars comprising the "Big Dipper", "the Wagon", "Charles's Wain" or "the Plough" (among others), with its stellar configuration mimicking the shape of the "Little Dipper".

The general constellation outline often features in numerous world cultures, and frequently is used as a symbol of the north. e.g. as the flag of Alaska. Also the asterism's two brightest stars, named Dubhe and Merak (α Ursae Majoris and β Ursae Majoris), can be used as the navigational pointer towards the place of the current northern pole star, Polaris in Ursa Minor.

Ursa Major is visible throughout the year from most of the northern hemisphere, and appears circumpolar above the mid-northern latitudes. From southern temperate latitudes the southern parts of the constellation can still be viewed.

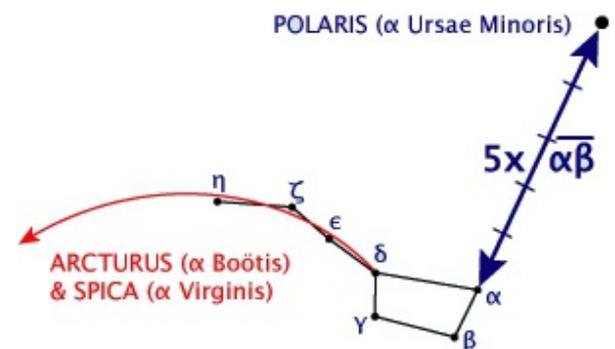
AK, with EarthSky and Wikipedia Notes



The asterism of the Big Dipper (shown in green) lies within the constellation of Ursa Major.



Ursa Major as depicted in Urania's Mirror, a set of constellation cards published in London c.1825.



The North Star (Polaris), the current northern pole star and the tip of the handle of the Little Dipper (Little Bear), can be located by extending an imaginary line through the front two stars of the asterism, Merak (β) and Dubhe (α).

This makes it useful in celestial navigation.