THE CONSTELLATION HYDRA, WATER SNAKE
Hydra is the largest of the 88 modern constellations, measuring 1303 square degrees. Also one of the longest at over 100 degrees, its southern end abuts Libra and Centaurus and its northern end borders Cancer. It has a long history, having been included among the 48 constellations listed by the 2nd century astronomer Ptolemy. It is commonly represented as a water snake. It should not be confused with the similarly named constellation of Hydrus. The neighboring constellations are Antlia, Cancer, Canis Minor, Centaurus, Corvus, Crater, Leo, Libra, Lupus, Monoceros, Puppis, Pyxis, Sextans and Virgo.

Despite its size, Hydra contains only one reasonably bright star, Alphard, designated Alpha Hydræ. It is an orange giant of magnitude 2.0, 177 light-years from Earth. Its traditional name means "the solitary one". Beta Hydræ is a blue-white star of magnitude 4.3, 365 light-years from Earth. Gamma Hydræ is a yellow giant of magnitude 3.0, 132 light-years from Earth.

Hydra has one bright binary star, Epsilon Hydræ, which is difficult to split in amateur telescopes; it has a period of 1000 years and is 135 light-years from Earth. The other main named star in Hydra is Sigma Hydræ, which has the name of Minaruja, from the Arabic for snake's nose. At magnitude 4.54, it is rather dim. The head of the snake corresponds to the Ashlesha nakshatra, a lunar zodiacal constellation in Indian astronomy.

Hydra contains three Messier objects. M83, also known as the Southern Pinwheel Galaxy, is located on the border of Hydra and Centaurus, M68 is a globular cluster near M83, and M48 is an open star cluster in the western end of the serpent. NGC 3242 is a planetary nebula of magnitude 7.5, 1400 light-years from Earth. Discovered in 1785 by William Herschel, it has earned the nickname "Ghost of Jupiter" because of its striking resemblance to the giant planet. 2600 light-years from Earth, its blue-green disk is visible in small telescopes and its halo is visible in larger instruments.

There are several globular clusters in Hydra. M68 is a globular cluster visible in binoculars and resolvable in medium amateur telescopes. It is 31,000 light-years from Earth and of the 8th magnitude. NGC 5694 is a globular cluster of magnitude 10.2, 105,000 light-years from Earth. Also called "Tombaugh's Globular Cluster", it was discovered as a non-stellar object in 1784 by William Herschel, its status as a globular cluster was not ascertained until 1932, when Clyde Tombaugh looked at photographic plates taken of the region near Pi Hydræ on 12 May 1931.

Mythology
The shape of Hydra resembles a twisting snake, and features as such in some Greek myths. One myth associates it with a water snake that a crow served Apollo in a cup when it was sent to fetch water; Apollo saw through the fraud, and angrily cast the crow, cup, and snake, into the sky. It is also associated with the monster Hydra, with its many heads, killed by Hercules, represented in another constellation. According to legend, if one of the hydra's heads was cut off, two more would grow in its place. However, Hercules burned out the roots of the heads he severed to prevent them from growing again, and thus overcame the hydra. AK