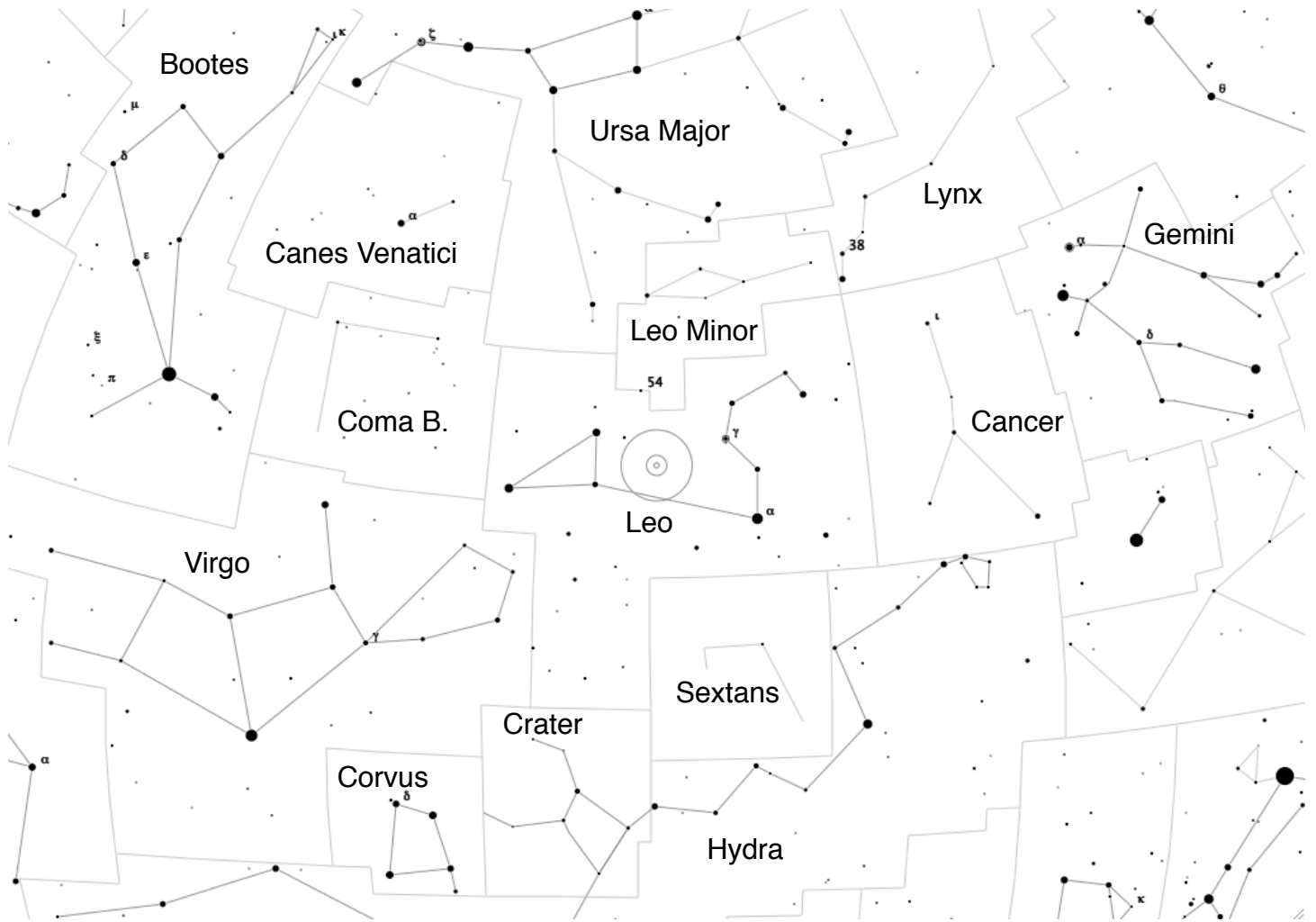


Hopping Around Leo



Leo the lion is a good starting point for hopping to the spring constellations. It doesn't always "pop out" like Orion, so if you don't spot it right away, don't worry - there is an easy trick to finding Leo. Find the Big Dipper and "poke a hole in bottom of it". Imagine water pouring out of the hole onto the back of Leo. This will focus your attention on the right part of the sky to see Leo. Look for the distinctive "sickle" or backwards question mark that represents the lions mane.

☾ While we're using the Big Dipper to find things, there are a few other constellations we should look at too. Use the curve of the dippers handle to "arc" to Arcturus, a bright star in the constellation Bootes, the herdsman. The body of Bootes looks like a kite or an ice cream cone to some.

☾ Continue along the imaginary "arc to Arcturus" and "spike" to Spica, the brightest star in the constellation Virgo the virgin. Virgo is quite a large constellation with the bright stars spread out a bit, so it's not always easy to spot. Use Spica and a chart to familiarize yourself with this constellation and it will eventually be easier to see.

☾ Under the dipper handle and right of Bootes is the constellation Canes Venatici, the hunting dogs. There are only two stars that are easily visible -- Alpha CVn aka "Cor Corali" is the brighter one and is a nice double star. Beta Cvn aka "Chara" is the other. These two stars don't make much of a constellation drawing, but they are handy in hopping to some nearby Messiers.

☾ The constellation between Arcturus and the back of Leo is Coma Berenices, Berenice's Hair. This is a faint constellation, but it's filled with lots of galaxies that extend down into Virgo.

☾ Right above Leo and below Ursa Major is the faint constellation Leo Minor. It has a few NGC galaxies to look at but no Messiers.

☾ Between Leo and Gemini is another faint constellation Cancer the Crab. From a dark site you may see the upside down Y shape of the constellation but city skies will often be too bright to spot it. The Beehive cluster, M44, is near the middle of the Y.

☾ Just below Cancer is the head of Hydra the water snake. Hydra is a very long constellation that hugs the horizon (as seen from northern latitudes).

☾ Moving east, between Leo and Hydra is a very faint constellation Sextans, the sextant. This is a "modern" constellation added only recently and it has only one star brighter than magnitude 5, so it's not going to stand out under city skies. For objects in this constellation, it's easier to hop off stars in neighbouring constellations.

☾ Continuing along the back of Hydra is the next constellation, Crater the Cup. It's a dimmer constellation but it can be picked out from a dark site.

☾ Next along the back of Hydra is Corvus the Crow. This constellation has four brighter stars that are much easier to pick out. In Greek mythology, Corvus serves Apollo, and is sent to fetch water, but it rests lazily on the journey, and after finally obtaining the water in a cup (Crater), takes back a water snake (Hydra) as well, as an excuse. According to the myth, Apollo saw through the fraud, and angrily cast the crow, cup, and snake, into the sky.

☾ Some stars to make note of are Denebola (the tail of the lion) and Vindemiatrix the northern most bright star in Virgo. Between these two stars is Virgo's Realm of galaxies. There are many Messier and NGC galaxies in this area. During a Messier Marathon it can be a challenge to find all the Messiers here because it can sometimes be difficult to know which of the many galaxies you're looking at.

☾ Clear skies and good observing!