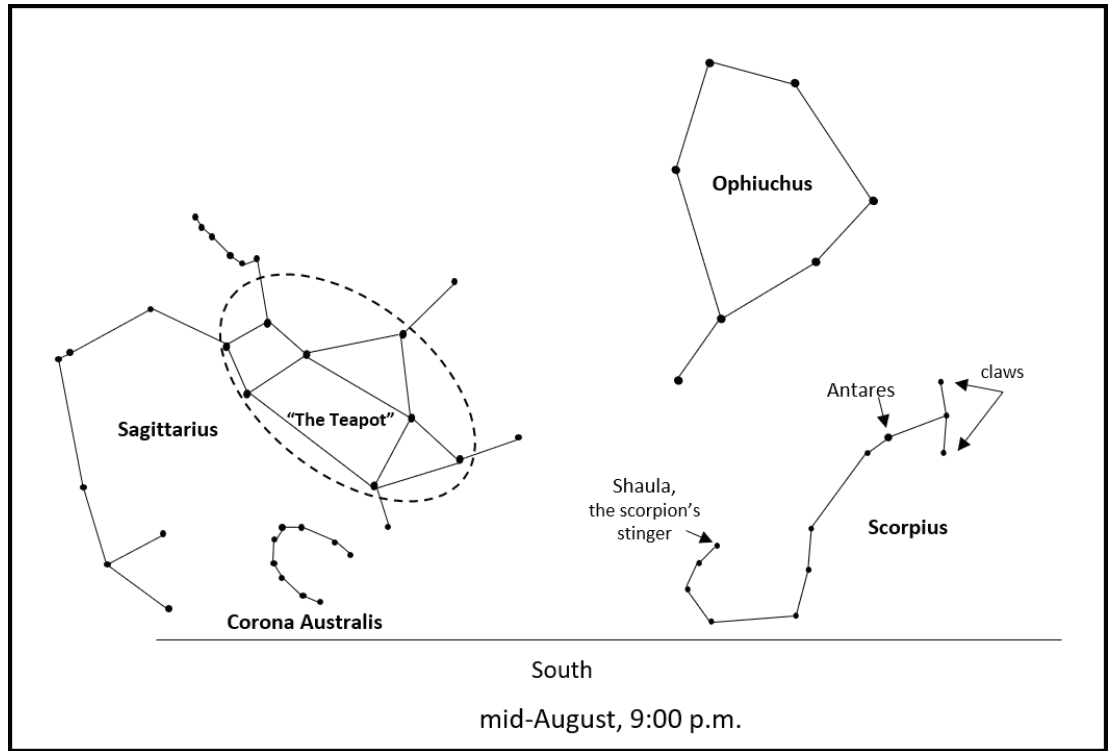


WHAT'S UP?

I hope you tried your hand at naming the constellations on the map in the previous installment. I've included the answers below. More importantly, I hope you had a chance to go outside and try to find them in the sky. It has taken me decades to learn to spot these. Learning the night sky takes time, and I strongly believe that it can bring us closer to the universe around us. Remember, it's dark for fully 50% of our lives. Why turn off our interaction with our surroundings just because it's dark out? In the next couple of articles, as we continue around the sky, we'll re-acquaint ourselves with some old friends from past installments.

In the south now at nightfall, hanging low in the south is a crawly creature – *Scorpius (the Scorpion)*. You'll need to have a very clear southern horizon to see all of the scorpion's tail (the star named *Shaula* marks the stinger at the end), but the claws and head should be visible in most areas. Find it? There's a bright red star in Scorpius named *Antares*. It marks the heart of the Scorpion. It is a red giant star. Can you see any color in it? Antares means something close to "like Mars" in Greek. Since Antares appears reddish, it was named as a comparison to Mars' color. Antares has been referred to as the "heart of the scorpion" and as just "the middle of the three stars in the body". Either works to help us form an image of this well-known arachnid in our own minds. Drawings of the scorpion against the background of stars now usually show the claws as marked by the northern and southern stars of the three to the west of Antares. Prior to the 1st century BCE, the claws extended much further west and were marked by the stars we now know as the constellation *Libra*.

Above Scorpio, is the constellation *Ophiuchus (OFF-ee-YOO-kus) the Serpent-bearer*. The stars of Ophiuchus form a large, roughly pentagon-shaped group that should be easy for you to find. Ophiuchus is an interesting constellation. The constellation's boundaries straddle the ecliptic. Because of that, it is sometimes considered as the 13th constellation of the Zodiac. As the Sun, Moon, and planets travel along the Ecliptic they move through Ophiuchus after leaving Scorpius and before they enter Sagittarius. In fact, the Sun spends more time in Ophiuchus each year (about 18 days) than it does in Scorpius (about 7 days). To the east (to the left as we view them now) of Scorpius and Ophiuchus is the large constellation of *Sagittarius, the Archer*. This is no ordinary archer though. This archer is a centaur. A centaur has the body and legs of a horse but with the upper torso of a human. While the full set of stars marking the archer span a large section of sky, there is a subset of stars that form a familiar and different shape – a teapot. The eight stars that form *The Teapot* are easy to spot. Try it. Last in our group of stars for this time is the constellation *Corona Australis, the Southern Crown*. This set of stars are dim (4th magnitude at best) and can be hard to pick out along our southern horizon.



Have you noticed the really bright object in the West just after sunset? That's Venus and it will be with us in this area of the sky through the end of the year. In the east and southeast now, Jupiter and Saturn are getting higher in the sky and more suited to viewing with binoculars and telescopes. They will also be with us through the rest of 2021. For those of you that make the early mornings your time to view our dark skies, our winter (yikes!) friend Orion is just up in the east before dawn. When the skies are lit by our closest star, there is still viewing to be done (with appropriate safeguards!) The Sun has entered a new sunspot cycle and there has been increasing activity. I'll write more about that next time.

You can reach me at astroblog@comcast.net with any questions and comments you have. This is What's Up? installment #50.

Keep looking up!

Barry