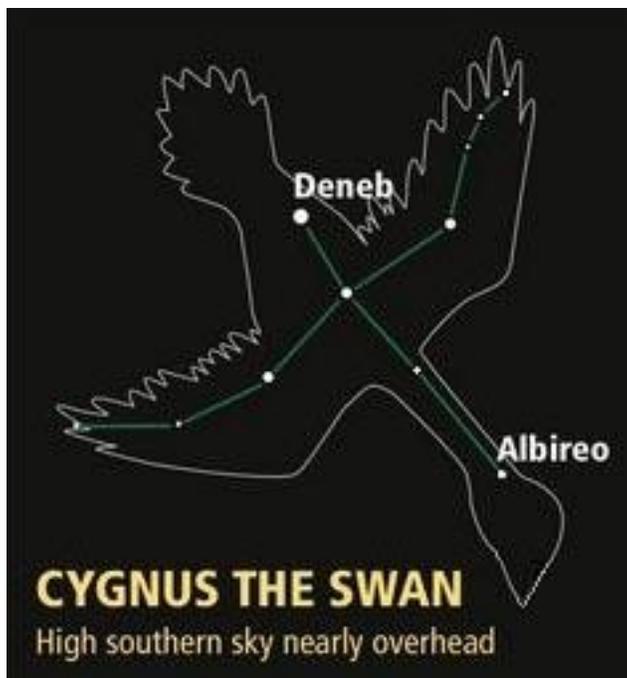


The Big Bird of summer still soars

By Mike Lynch

There are heroes, hunters, musical instruments, royalty, and all kinds of other critters, including eight birds, which make up the soap operas in our night sky.

Among the 65 to 70 constellations seen from Everett the biggest and brightest celestial bird is Cygnus the Swan, flying nearly overhead. The brightest star at the tail of the high flying swan is Deneb, one of the stars of the Summer Triangle that takes up a major stretch of the high southeastern heavens at the start of evening. The other Summer Triangle stars are Vega and Altair, the brightest stars in their respective constellations Lyra the Harp and Aquila the Eagle. Just look for the three brightest stars you can see high overhead and that's it. Even though we have a full harvest moon coming up this week you should see it the Summer Triangle without much trouble.



Facing directly south and gazing nearly overhead at the Summer Triangle, the star on the upper left corner of the triangle is Deneb. It's the dimmest star in the triangle but by no means is it a puny star. Quite the contrary, it's a fantastically huge star some 1,500 light years away with one light year equaling almost 6 trillion miles. Traveling to Deneb is not a weekend jaunt. It's so far away that the light we see from it tonight left that star around 500 AD. Theoretically it could explode tonight and our great, great, great, great ... grandkids wouldn't see the explosion until around the year 3,500.

Cygnus the Swan contains within it a pattern of stars called the Northern Cross. In fact, it's much easier to see the Northern Cross before looking for the Swan. Deneb sits at the head of the cross and if you're facing south the cross will be diagonally orientated and leaning to the left.

At the foot of the cross is the not so impressive star Albireo, at least to the naked eye. However, with a small telescope you'll see Albireo is not just one star but a beautiful pair of stars, one gold and the other blue. It's one of the best double stars of the sky.

To expand on the Northern Cross and find the entire swan is easy; just look for the stars at either end of the arms of the cross and turn them into the wings of Cygnus the Swan. Deneb becomes the tail of the giant swan and Albireo becomes the swan's head.

The Greek mythology story of how Cygnus got into the sky is a sad one, although it has a somewhat happy ending. According to Greek myths, Apollo, the god of the sun, was one of the head honchos of the gods on Mount Olympus. Every day he had the awesome responsibility of guiding the sun chariot across the sky. The chariot was pulled gallantly by a fleet of flying white horses. Inside of the giant glass chariot rode the sun.

Phaethon, one of Apollo's many, many children from several different mothers, idolized his dad and very much wanted to eventually take over the reins of the sun chariot when Apollo retired. At just 10 years old Phaethon begged and begged his dad to let him take the sun chariot for a ride, but Apollo said no for good reason. Certainly it was a colossal accident waiting to happen. Phaethon, in his youthful exuberance, was convinced he could handle it. One morning temptation set in, and the inevitable disaster followed.

Apollo overslept that morning and Phaethon realized that this was his chance. He entered the hangar with the golden chariot, climbed in, backed it out and bellowed out a celestial "giddy up" to the flying horses. Before he knew it he was airborne.

Surprisingly he handled the sun vehicle like a pro at first, but soon he got cocky and lost control of the sun chariot. A crash of celestial proportions was moments away. If the sun crashed the entire world would turn into a blaze of fire.

From Mount Olympus Zeus saw what was happening and took immediate action. He couldn't tell who was in the driver's seat but he knew it wasn't his buddy Apollo. Not recognizing Phaethon he concluded it was an enemy intruder at the reins. He frantically shouted down to Apollo for help, and then shot a lightning bolt at Phaethon, spearing Apollo's kid out of the driver's seat and on the way to a fatal plunge. Meanwhile Apollo, with all his might, leaped up into the seat of the chariot and got control just before the sun had a very unfriendly meeting with the ground.

Meanwhile Phaethon plunged into the river Po and was killed on impact. At that height it was like slamming into a cement slab. Soon after all of this happened Apollo and Zeus tragically discovered who was shot out of the chariot and met his demise. Other gods recognized the body as well and were just as grief stricken. As a lasting memorial they magically transformed his body into the beautiful constellation we see today as Cygnus the swan.

Enjoy the high flying big bird of the night sky.

Mike Lynch is an amateur astronomer and professional broadcast meteorologist for WCCO Radio in Minneapolis and is author of the book, "Stars, a Month by Month Tour of the Constellations" published by Adventure Publications available at bookstores at <http://www.adventurepublications.net>.

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