

ACTIVEfamily

MAGAZINE

Your Guide to Fun, Healthy Activities, Ideas, Books, the Arts, Games and More!

How Do I



Find the North Star

Back in the '50's when R. M. "Max" Maxwell was just a kid, he and a buddy went to Coney Island one fine summer evening. That night, he had two dimes left in his pocket. As they walked the boardwalk, a fellow with a telescope invited them to view the Moon "10¢ each." Max was awestruck by what he saw! And that love for all things astronomy has held from that day to now.

A lecturer at the Treworgy Planetarium, Max has been with the Mystic Seaport Museum for eight years. And there are lots of things he loves about working there: the educational mission, the people he meets and teaches through his lectures, collaborating with the community of scientists who also work there, and the students who visit the planetarium.

A science and math teacher by education and experience, Max is a gifted lecturer with a sense of humor and quiet excitement in his voice. Several times each day he leads groups on a 35-minute virtual tour of the night sky around Mystic and beyond. Explaining how to locate and identify the stars, planets and constellations in the sky, he also teaches some basic principals of navigation.

The North Star

Other than the Sun, the North Star has long been regarded as the most important star in the heavens. When observing this star you face true north and so are able to determine all points of the compass: westward to your left, eastward to your right and southward behind you. For centuries sailors

and caravans navigated their way across vast expanses of ocean and desert by relying on the North Star.

With a little practice, you too can find the North Star and, unlike your GPS, it won't run out of power in our lifetime! Here is some fun information Max shared about the North Star:

How do I find the North Star?

First you have to recognize the cup-like form of the "Big Dipper"; if you don't know it, ask someone to point it out to you or refer to a star chart. Look for the two "pointer stars" on the far edge of the cup away from the handle. Continue the line of sight from the bottom to the upper star for 5 1/2 lengths and there you see the North Star.

How bright is it?

The North Star is the 50th brightest star in the sky.

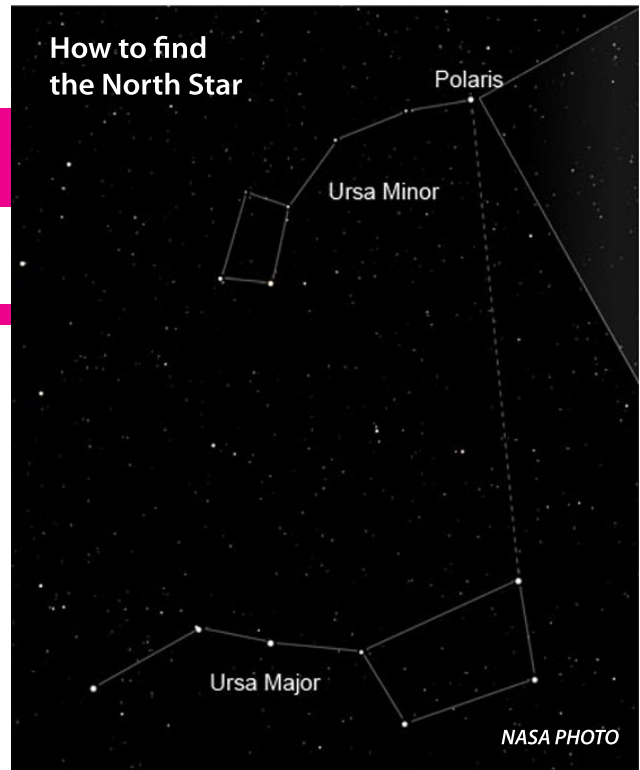
What is its proper name?

Commonly referred to as the North Star, its Latin name, Stella Polaris, means "Pole Star." Polaris has been known by many names in the past: the Lodestar, the Steering Star and Stella Maris ("Star of the Sea").

To which constellation does it belong?

The North Star belongs to the constellation "Ursa Minor" or "Little Bear" (also commonly known as the "Little Dipper"). The North Star is the last star on the tail.

How to find the North Star



Have there been other "North Stars"?

Polaris has not always been the 'North Star' and won't be in the future. That is because the Earth spins on its axis like a gyroscope and the rotational axis slowly changes direction, in a circle, over a cycle of about 26,000 years. Currently, the Earth's axis points about 3/4 of a degree away from Polaris. The pole star was once Thuban, believed to be relied upon by the ancient Egyptians when building the pyramids. In about 8400 AD Alderamin, the brightest star in the constellation Cepheus will become pole star and in 14800 AD the pole star will become Vega, part of the constellation Lyra.

For more information, visit the daily planetarium show at the Seaport! Also check out these great websites: www.mysticseaport.org/planetarium, www.astronomy.com (click link: Astronomy for Kids) and www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/index.html.

