



girl scouts  
of southern arizona



## NANCY'S FAVORITE SKY STORIES

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### ***Little Eyes (Pacific Islands, Winter)***

This story features stars from two Winter Hexagon constellations, Taurus and Canis Major. The legend of *Matariki: The Little Eyes* is from Polynesia. Nancy and colleague Thea Canizo offer the following retelling:

There was once a most beautiful star, far brighter and more beautiful than any other in the heavens. This star was not content to be silent; it constantly bragged about how much brighter it was than any other star, and even suggested that its beauty was greater than that of the gods themselves! This kind of talk had disastrous consequences for the star. The sky god Tane heard of the star's boasting. He decided to do away with it by forcing it into the area of darkness from which no light can ever be seen.

The god Tane got help from two other stars named Mere (Sirius) and Aumea (Aldebaran). They were eager to help Tane because they would become more important once the beautiful star was eliminated.

One night when the Moon was not up, the sky was dark and quiet. Tane and his two helpers crept up to the beautiful star and screamed, "Now you will be gone!" The beautiful star jumped up in terror and ran to hide behind the stars of the river of the Milky Way. Mere climbed to the source of the river, built a dam, and changed the path of the water so that the beautiful star could no longer hide behind it. The star took off in fright again and quickly put a good distance between itself and its three enemies. Seeing that the star was escaping, the god Tane picked up Aumea, took careful aim, and threw Aumea with all his might at the fleeing star. Smash! Aumea struck with such force that the beautiful star split into six pieces.

Tane, Mere, and Aumea gleefully celebrated their success and returned to their places in the sky. Mere, now called Sirius, is the brightest star of all. Aumea, now called Aldebaran, stands proudly without any competitor close by. The six pieces of the former beauty traveled together to a new part of the heavens. There they can be found today. They form a beautiful cluster called Matariki, or Little Eyes (the Pleiades). They, like the beautiful star they came from, are very vain, but they have learned not to be so boastful. People in Polynesia, however, say that from time to time soft whispers can be heard coming from the cluster. "We're still the loveliest sight in the sky, aren't we?"

### ***The Sisters and the Milky Way (Arabian, winter)***

This month's story again features some of the constellations of the Winter Hexagon. In addition, the star Canopus in the constellation Carina and the Milky Way itself are part of this story from

ancient Arabia. Nancy and colleague Thea Canizo offer the following retelling of *The Sisters and the Milky Way*:

Long ago a young man named Suhail fell in love with a girl named Al Jauzah. He was so smitten with her that he left his home in the southern sky and pursued her up to her home in the north. But Al Jauzah had no interest in Suhail. Suhail proposed marriage time and again, but Al Jauzah always refused him. Finally, she became furiously angry at him because he would not give up. She gave him a mighty kick that sent him reeling through the sky. “Go back where you came from!” she shouted as Suhail flew across a great river and into the far away southern sky.

It happened that Suhail had two sisters who had followed after him on his trip to woo Al Jauzah. When they saw him being hurled homeward, they hurried after him. They quickly came to that part of the sky which has the great river running through it. The sisters would have to swim across it.

The first sister was older and stronger, so she led the way. She jumped into the river, swam across it, and then turned to wait for her sister. The younger sister was timid and not as good a swimmer. She tried and tried to swim across, but she grew tired and weak and became afraid of drowning if she jumped into the water one more time. She fell to the bank of the river and wept and wept.

Both sisters are still in the sky. The older one who crossed the river is Sirius, the brightest star in the sky. The younger sister is Procyon, who to this day sits crying on the opposite bank of the river. Procyon shines less brightly because she is younger and weaker and her tears dim the light. The great river that separates them is the Milky Way. Their brother Suhail is now called Canopus and shines brightly in the southern sky, ever waiting for his sisters to arrive home.

### ***Coyote and the Five Wolf Brothers (North America, Spring)***

There are a number of versions of the legend that credits coyote with arranging the star patterns we see in the night sky. Following is a retelling of the story of *Coyote and the Five Wolf Brothers*:

At one time, Coyote lived with five Wolf Brothers. Every night the Wolf Brothers would share the meat from their hunt with Coyote. But they had a secret they would not share – a secret about a strange thing they had seen in the sky. Every night as they whispered together, Coyote became more and more curious.

Finally, Coyote just had to know. One day he asked the oldest Wolf Brother, “What is it you saw in the sky?” But the oldest Wolf Brother did not answer.

Coyote asked the second-oldest Wolf Brother, “What is it you talk about every night? What did you see in the sky?” But the second Wolf Brother did not answer.

Coyote asked the third Wolf Brother the same question. No answer. Coyote asked the fourth Wolf Brother. No answer.

But the fourth Wolf Brother gathered his brothers and asked, “Should we tell Coyote what we have been talking about? Should we tell Coyote what we have seen in the sky?”

“Yes, yes,” said the youngest Wolf Brother. “They cannot hurt us or Coyote.”

“True,” agreed the second Wolf Brother. “They are high in the sky. They cannot hurt us or Coyote.”

“We’ll tell him tonight,” said the oldest Wolf Brother.

So that night the Wolf Brothers told Coyote what they had seen: two strange animals, high in the sky, too high for the Wolf Brothers to reach them. Coyote was even more curious now. He wanted to see the creatures for himself. But how would they all get high up into the sky?

Coyote had an idea. He gathered together as many arrows as he could find. One after another, he shot the arrows into the sky. The first arrow stuck to the sky. The second arrow stuck to the first, the third arrow stuck to the second, and so on until Coyote had made a long line of arrows from the sky to the Earth.

Early the next day, Coyote, the five Wolf Brothers, and their dog began to climb the arrows to the sky. For many days and nights they climbed, until at last they reached the sky. There they saw the two strange animals – two huge, fierce grizzly bears!

Now the two youngest Wolf Brothers were curious. They walked toward the two fierce grizzly bears. When nothing happened, the two older Wolf Brothers followed. But the oldest brother and his dog stayed behind. The four brave Wolf Brothers walked even closer. But the grizzly bears just looked at them. The four Wolf Brothers looked back. Finally, the oldest Wolf Brother and his dog joined them.

Coyote admired the beautiful picture they made. He thought the grizzly bears and the Wolf Brothers and their dog should stay in the sky, making a sky story for all time.

Then Coyote had another idea. He climbed back down the line of arrows, breaking off the arrows as he hurried toward the ground. Now the five Wolf Brothers and their dog could not return to Earth. They stayed in the sky and made a beautiful picture story for everyone to see.

We still see Coyote’s picture today, but we call it the Big Dipper. The two bowl stars (Dubhe and Merak) that point to Polaris, the North Star, are the grizzly bears. The two bowl stars opposite (Megrez and Phecda) are the two younger Wolf Brothers. The first and last stars in the handle (Alioth and Alkaid) are the two older Wolf Brothers. The oldest Wolf Brother and his dog stand in the middle place in the handle (Mizar and Alcor).

### ***Magpies and the Milky Way (Asia, Summer)***

The story of the Weaving Princess and the Shepherd (or herdsman or farmer) can be found in both Chinese and Japanese traditions. Below is a summary of the story. Other versions of this story are found in Tom Birdseye’s *A Song of Stars* (1990) and Jeanne Lee’s *Legend of the Milky Way* (1982), a Reading Rainbow Book which tells the Chinese version of the legend.

Vega, the star represented by the Weaving Princess, is a prominent star in the constellation Lyra (the harp). Altair, the star represented by the Shepherd, is a prominent star in the constellation Aquila (the eagle). In the summer these two stars can be seen separated by the Milky Way. Vega and Altair are part of an *asterism* — a prominent group of stars, but not one of the 88 designated constellations — called the Summer Triangle. The third star in the triangle is Deneb, located in the constellation Cygnus (the swan), or the Northern Cross. Another common asterism is the Big Dipper, seven prominent stars within the constellation Ursa Major (the Great Bear).

Following is an explanation of the festival associated with the Summer Triangle:

“Tanabata, also known as the "star festival", takes place on the 7th day of the 7th month of the year, when, according to a Chinese legend, the two stars Altair and Vega, which are usually separated from each other by the Milky Way, are able to meet.

Because the 7th month of the year roughly coincides with August rather than July according to the formerly used lunar calendar, Tanabata is still celebrated on August 7th in some regions of Japan, while it is celebrated on July 7th in other regions.

One popular Tanabata custom is to write one's wishes on a piece of paper, and hang that piece of paper on a specially erected bamboo tree, in the hope that the wishes come true.

Colorful Tanabata festivals are held across Japan in early July and August. Among the biggest and most famous ones are the Tanabata Festivals of Sendai in August and Hiratsuka near Tokyo in July.” (<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2283.html>)

Story Summary:

Long ago there was a beautiful princess, the daughter of the Sky God. She was the most skillful weaver in the land, weaving beautiful cloth at her loom every day. One day she looked up from her loom and saw a herdsman at work. She fell in love with him at once. When the herdsman saw the princess at her window, he also fell in love.

The Weaving Princess begged her father to allow her to marry the poor herdsman. The Sky God agreed, and the two were very happy together. They were so happy that they each neglected their work. The princess forgot to weave her beautiful cloth, and the herdsman neglected his animals. The Sky God decided to punish them.

The Sky God placed the princess in the sky in one place, and the herdsman in the sky in another place. She was called Orihime Boshi (Weaving Princess Star) and he was called Hiko Boshi (Puller of Cow Star). Between them the Sky God put a river of stars. They could see each other, but could not cross the river. The princess and herdsman returned to their work with great sadness.

The Sky God took pity on them and decided that if they worked hard at their tasks, he would allow the princess and the herdsman to meet one night each year. Toward the end of summer, a great flock of magpies flew to the river of the stars. They settled onto the water and formed a bridge for the princess and herdsman to cross. The next night the magpies were gone, and the princess and herdsman returned to their work for another year.

### ***King of the Stars (Pacific Islands, Fall)***

The Never-Ending Bear Hunt and Magpies Across the Milky Way (stories from the summer workshops) are both appropriate for the September sky. If you are able to find Cassiopeia (the Queen), try to find Cepheus (the King) to the left and a little above. It will look like a child's drawing of a house standing on its pointy roof. These two are part of the story of Andromeda and Perseus and all of the characters will begin to appear during the Fall. Pegasus and Cetus complete the story. Check your planisphere or planetarium program for best viewing times.

Besides the Orion and Scorpius legend, there is another story that explains why we never see certain constellations together in the sky. This story is from the Pacific Islands and also features Scorpius:

The mother of all the stars lived on an atoll in the Pacific Ocean. All of her sons came down from the heavens to visit her. They suggested a canoe race and whichever son reached a certain island first would become King of the Stars. All the sons got busy, readying themselves for the race.

The mother first asked her eldest son to take her with him, but he refused. His mother had too many possessions to bring along and the weight would slow him down. So she asked each of her other sons in turn, and none was willing to take her. Only the youngest son, Pleiades, was willing to take his mother. He took his mother and her seven possessions into his canoe. She showed him how to place each possession.

When the race started, the youngest son's canoe flew forward. The possessions were a new kind of sail and rigging. The oldest brother used his right as the first-born and ordered Pleiades to give him the canoe. Pleiades obeyed, but his mother played a trick on her eldest son. As she and Pleiades jumped into the ocean, she took with her the yardarm of the sail. She and her youngest son began to swim to the island.

In order for the eldest son to sail the canoe, he had to fasten the sail to his shoulders. Look at the shape of Scorpius and you will see his bent back. By the time he got on course and reached the island, Pleiades had become King of the Stars. The eldest brother was so angry he said he wished never to see Pleiades again. So when Pleiades rises in the east, the eldest brother (represented by the star Antares in Scorpius) sets in the west.

### ***The Brave Cooks (North America, Fall/Winter)***

A Native American story from the northwest involves the constellations Auriga and Perseus. Nancy's retelling follows:

Long ago the Couer d'Alene men and women lived all across the northern plain. The men were hunters, who worked very hard all day and came home very hungry. The women collected nuts, roots, and berries.

In the summer the people dug camas roots. Then the women made a meal from these delicious roots. First they built a large pit called an earth oven. They filled the pit with rocks, which they heated. Then they cooked the camas roots on the hot rocks. The men of the village were forbidden to approach the oven. If they came close, the roots would not cook the way they should!

The roots gave off a wonderful, sweet fragrance as they began to cook. The wonderful sweet fragrance drifted with the breeze and soon reached the nose of a very naughty skunk. He decided to follow the sweet smell and see what he could find.

He followed the smell to the edge of a village. He crept quietly through the village, sniffing and following the fragrance of the cooking roots. At last the skunk found the cooking pit.

Skunk did not like people and they did not like him. He decided to ruin the camas roots cooking in the earth oven.

Skunk knew that people ran the other way when they saw him coming. He walked right up to the edge of the cooking pit. Some of the women were frightened and ran away. Soon only a few brave women and the naughty skunk faced each other across the cooking pit. The women knew<sup>2</sup> that Skunk could release his foul smell to ruin their dinner. His smell would get into their food, their clothes, and their hair. But they had worked very hard digging roots in the summer sun. They had worked very hard digging the cooking pit and heating the stones. They did not want Skunk to ruin their dinner.

The women sat down in a tight circle all around the edge of the earth oven. Skunk glared at the women and tried hard to look very fierce. They glared right back at the skunk.

Skunk was very surprised. He had never met such brave women! He still wanted to spray his foul smell over the sweet roots. So he decided to be patient and wait. The women and Skunk sat there so long they were turned into stars. Even now we see the women sitting around the cooking pit protecting their food while nearby Skunk waits patiently for his chance to ruin their meal.

The constellation Auriga represents the women and the cooking pit. The constellation Perseus represents the skunk.

### ***Never-ending Bear Hunt (Celestial Storytelling; North America, entire year)***

Many years ago people looked into the night sky and imagined wonderful stories in the stars. One story takes place during the course of an entire year and tells about the adventures of the Great Bear and the Bird Hunters.

When the winter ended the Great Bear left her cave. After her long sleep, she was hungry and anxious to find food. As she hunted for food, other hunters were following her. Seven brave Bird Hunters followed the Great Bear across the Sky. Robin led the hunt, followed closely by Chickadee and his cooking pot and Moosebird. Farther behind were their friends: Saw-whet, Horned Owl, Blue Jay, and Pigeon. The bear looked big and clumsy, but she moved across the sky rapidly. The hunters followed her all summer, but as autumn approached they had still not caught up to the Great Bear.

Some of the hunters became tired and discouraged. Saw-whet, the last hunter in line, left the hunt. Soon Horned Owl also gave up and went to search for Saw-whet. Blue Jay and Pigeon tried to keep up with the leaders, but soon they also left the hunt and flew home.

Only Robin, Chickadee, and Moosebird followed the Great bear into autumn. The bear grew angry and rose up on her hind legs. She growled loudly and clawed the air to scare the hunters. But Robin was a brave hunter. He shot an arrow and hit the Great Bear. Drops of her blood fell on Robin's feathers, turning his breast bright red. Other drops fell on the autumn leaves coloring them bright red.

When winter came, the dead bear lay on her back up in the sky. But her spirit returned to the cave and entered another bear. In the spring, the bear will leave the cave again to travel across the spring and summer sky, always pursued by the Bird Hunters.