

The chart is oriented for  
 Feb. 15 at midnight NZDT  
 Mar. 1 at 11 p.m. "  
 Mar. 15 at 10 p.m. "  
 April 1 at 9 p.m. "

### Evening sky in March 2010

To use the chart, hold it up to the sky. Turn the chart so the direction you are looking is at the bottom of the chart. If you are looking to the south then have 'South horizon' at the lower edge. As the earth turns the sky appears to rotate clockwise around the south celestial pole (SCP on the chart). Stars rise in the east and set in the west, just like the sun. The sky makes a small extra westward shift each night as we orbit the sun.

Sirius is the brightest star in the evening sky, northwest of overhead. Canopus, the second brightest star, is southwest of overhead. Orange Mars is low in the north. Saturn, medium-bright, is level with similar-looking Spica, low in the eastern sky. The Pointers and Crux, the Southern Cross, are midway up the southeast sky. The Scorpion rises in the southeast later.

## The Evening Sky in March 2010

**Sirius** is the first star to appear at dusk, northwest of overhead. It is quickly followed by **Canopus**, southwest of the zenith, then orange **Mars** low in the north. Below Sirius are **Rigel** and **Betelgeuse**, the brightest stars in **Orion**. Between them is a line of three stars: Orion's belt. To southern hemisphere star watchers, the line of three makes the bottom of 'The Pot'. Orion's belt points down and left to a V-shaped pattern of stars making the face of **Taurus** the Bull. Further down and left, low in the northwest, is the **Pleiades** or **Matariki** star cluster, setting early.

**Sirius**, 'the Dog Star', marks the head of **Canis Major** the big dog. A group of stars above it make the dog's hindquarters and tail. Sirius is the brightest star in the sky both because it is relatively close, nine light years\* away, and 23 times brighter than the sun. **Procyon**, between Sirius and Mars, marks the smaller of the two dogs following Orion the hunter across the sky. Procyon is seven times brighter than the sun and 11 light years away.

**Mars** is bright and orange above the north skyline. We passed by Mars in late January. It is slowly fading as we leave it behind. At mid month it is 130 million km away and small in a telescope.

Left of Mars are **Pollux** and **Castor**, marking the heads of **Gemini** the twins. Above and right of Mars is the **Praesepe cluster**, marking the shell of **Cancer** the crab. Praesepe is also called the Beehive cluster, the reason obvious when it is viewed in binoculars. It is 500 light years away.

**Rigel**, above and left of Orion's belt, is a bluish supergiant star, 40 000 times brighter than the sun and much hotter. It is 800 light years away. Orange **Betelgeuse**, below and right of the line of three, is a red-giant star, cooler than the sun but much bigger and 9000 times brighter. It is 400 light years from us. The handle of "The Pot", or Orion's sword, has the Orion Nebula at its centre; a glowing gas cloud many light-years across and around 1300 light years away.

The V-shaped group making the face of **Taurus** the bull is called the Hyades cluster. It is 130 light years away. Orange **Aldebaran**, Arabic for 'the eye of the bull', is not a member of the cluster but merely on the line of sight, half the cluster's distance. The **Pleiades** cluster, impressive in binoculars, is 400 light years from us. Its stars formed around 100 million years ago.

**Crux**, the Southern Cross, is in the southeast. Below it are Beta and **Alpha Centauri**, often called 'The Pointers'. Alpha Centauri is the closest naked-eye star, 4.3 light years away. Beta Centauri, like most of the stars in Crux, is a blue-giant star hundreds of light years away. **Canopus** is also a very luminous distant star; 13 000 times brighter than the sun and 300 light years away.

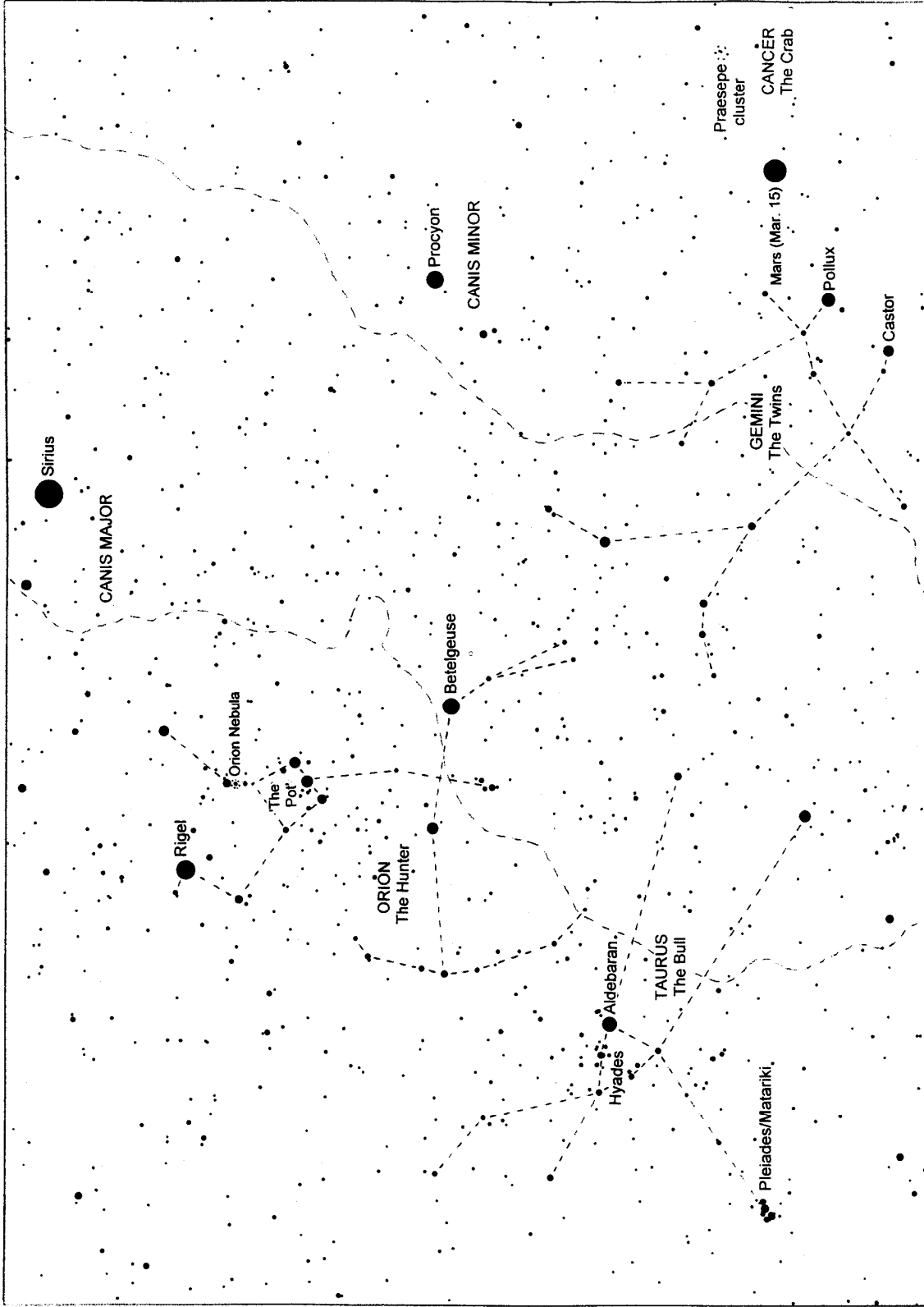
The **Milky Way** is brightest in the southeast toward Crux. It becomes broader lower in the southeast toward **Scorpius**. Above Crux the Milky Way can be traced to nearly overhead where it fades. It becomes very faint in the north, right of Orion. The Milky Way is our edgewise view of the galaxy, the pancake of billions of stars of which the sun is just one.

The Clouds of Magellan, **LMC** and **SMC** are high in the south sky, easily seen by eye on a dark moonless night. They are two small galaxies about 160 000 and 200 000 light years away.

**Saturn** is in the east at dusk. It is a little brighter than **Spica** the brightest star in **Virgo**, on Saturn's right. Saturn's rings are nearly edge-on to us this year. In a telescope they look like a thick line through the planet. Saturn is 1280 million km away in mid March.

Brilliant Venus is beginning a slow rise into the western evening sky as it catches up on us from the far side of the sun. It might be seen near the west horizon soon after sunset, setting half an hour after the sun. At the end of the month Mercury will be just below Venus but a lot fainter.

\*A **light year (l.y.)** is the distance that light travels in one year: nearly 10 million million km or  $10^{13}$  km. Sunlight takes eight minutes to get here; moonlight about one second. Sunlight reaches Neptune, the outermost major planet, in four hours. It takes four years to reach the nearest star, Alpha Centauri.



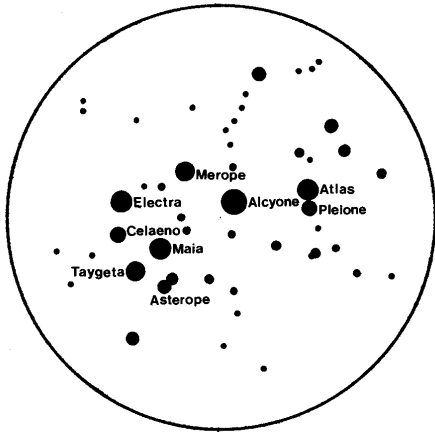
**Northern Evening Sky in March 2010**

The chart shows our northern sky in the evening. The chart may need to be tilted to the left or right to match the sky, depending on the time of night. Interesting objects are described on the other side of this page.

Chart produced by Guide 8 software; [www.projectpluto.com](http://www.projectpluto.com). Labels and text added by Alan Gilmore, Mt John Observatory of the University of Canterbury, P.O. Box 56, Lake Tekapo 8770, New Zealand. [www.canterbury.ac.nz](http://www.canterbury.ac.nz)

## Interesting Objects in the Northern Sky In March 2010

**Sirius** and **Mars** are eye-catching objects in the northern sky in February. Sirius is high up the sky, northwest of the zenith, and white coloured. Mars is orange and low in the north at dusk. The most prominent northern constellations are on a diagonal line down and left of Sirius. First is **Orion** the Hunter marked by prominent **Rigel** and **Betelgeuse** with the well-known 'pot' or 'saucepan' pattern between them. Next is **Taurus** the Bull with **Aldebaran** being one of Taurus's eyes. The V-shaped **Hyades** cluster outlines the bull's head. (All these pictures were thought up by north hemisphere cultures so are upside down to us.) Further down the **Pleiades** or **Matariki** star cluster is close to the northwest skyline and sets early. Low in the north, left of Mars, are **Castor** and **Pollux** marking the heads of **Gemini** the Twins. Above and right of Mars is the **Praesepe** star cluster, a faint glow to the eye, making the shell of **Cancer** the Crab

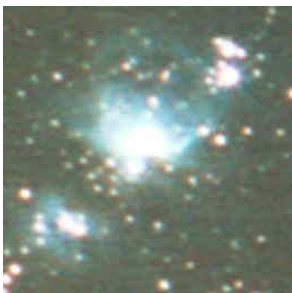


The **Pleiades / Seven Sisters / Matariki / Subaru**, and many other names, is a cluster of stars well known in both hemispheres. Though often called the Seven Sisters, most modern eyes see only six stars. Dozens are visible in binoculars. The cluster is about 400 light years away. Its brightest stars are around 200 times brighter than the sun.

One **light year (l.y.)** is the distance light travels in one year: about 10 million million km or 6 million million miles. Light from the sun reaches us in 8 minutes; from the moon in 1 second. Sunlight takes 4 hours to reach Neptune, the outermost significant planet, and 4 years to reach Alpha Centauri, the nearest star.

The **Hyades** cluster is 150 light years away. Its brightest stars (not Aldebaran!) are about 70 times brighter than the sun. **Aldebaran** is not a member of the cluster but simply on the line of sight. It is 65 l.y. away and 150 times brighter than the sun. Aldebaran is a giant star about 25 times bigger than the sun though only five times heavier. Its orange colour is due to its temperature, around 3500°C. The sun is 5500°C.

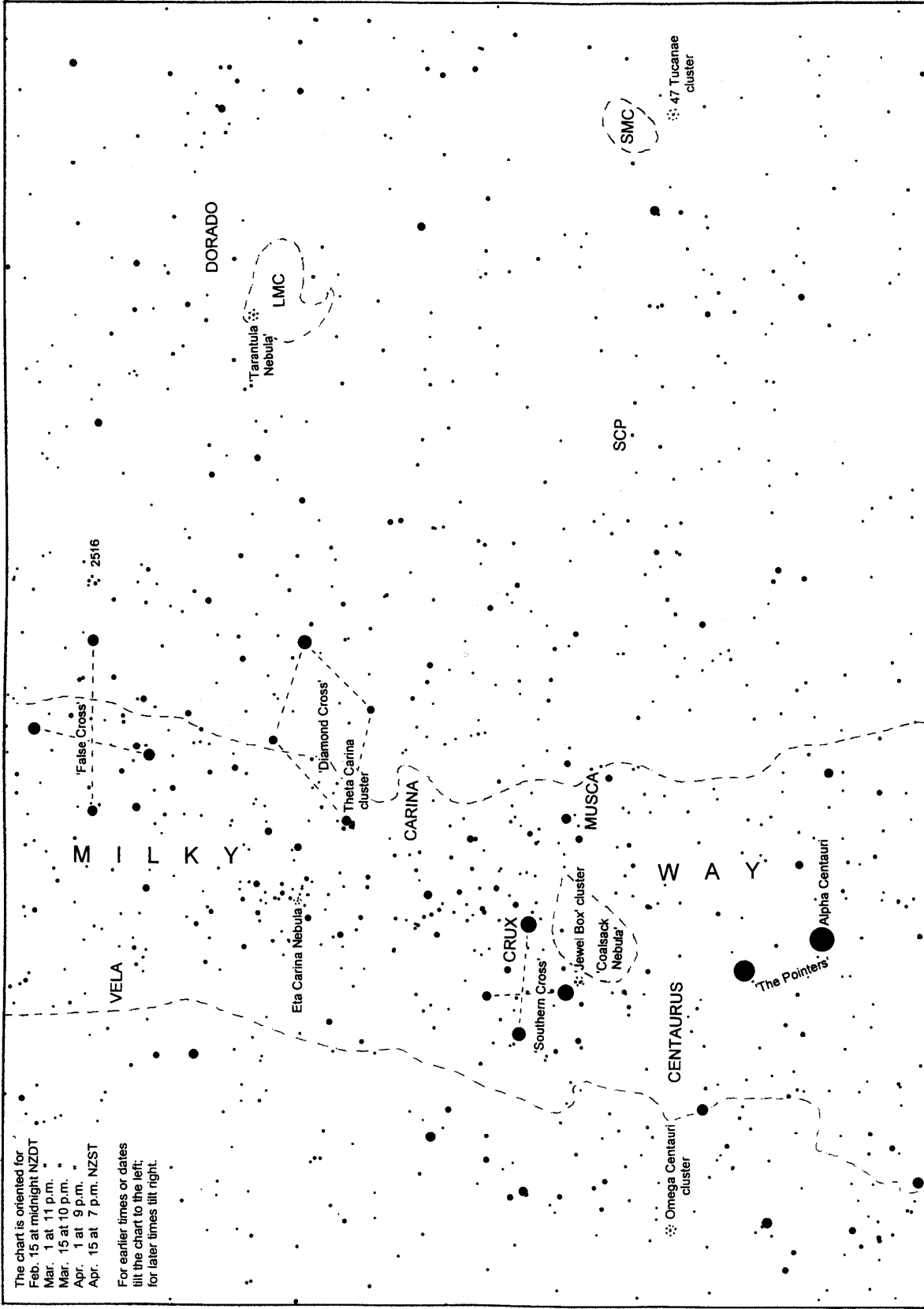
**Orion**, in the northern hemisphere view, has a shield raised toward Taurus and a club ready for action. The line of three stars makes Orion's Belt. The line of faint stars above the belt form Orion's Sword in the northern view, dangling from his belt. To most southern hemisphere sky watchers the belt and sword form **The Pot**, or the Saucepan.



The **Orion Nebula** is visible in binoculars as a misty glow around the middle stars of Orion's Sword or the handle of The Pot. It is a vast cloud of dust and gas about 1300 l.y. away and more than 20 l.y. across. Ultra-violet light from a massive, extremely hot star in the cloud causes it to glow. Some stars in this region are less than two million years old. The sun, by contrast, is 4.6 billion years old. Stars continue to form in a giant dust cloud behind the glowing nebula. There are many bright and dark nebulae in this region. The Horsehead nebula, a favourite of astronomy books, is beside the right-hand star of Orion's Belt, but too faint to be seen in small telescopes.

**Sirius** is the brightest star because it is both brighter than the sun and relatively close 8.6 l.y. away. Sirius was often called 'the dog star' being the brightest star in Canis Major, one of the two dogs that follow Orion across the sky. **Rigel** is a blue 'supergiant' star around 40 000 times brighter than the sun and 800 l.y. away. Its surface temperature is around 20 000°C, giving it a bluish colour. **Betelgeuse** is a red giant star 250 times bigger than the sun -- wider than earth's orbit! -- but only around 20 times heavier. It is mostly very thin gas surrounding a hot dense core. It is 10 000 times brighter than the sun, about 400 l.y. away, and has a surface temperature around 3000°C.

**Mars**, though bright, is disappointing in a telescope. It is more than 130 million km from us in March and shows only a tiny disc. It stays in the evening sky, getting fainter, for most of the year.

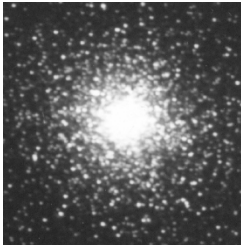


**Southern Evening Sky in March-April**  
 The chart shows the southeast sky. Interesting star clusters and nebulae are indicated with asterisks. They are described on the other side of this page.

Chart produced by Guide 8 software: [www.projectpluto.com](http://www.projectpluto.com). Labels added by Alan Gilmore, Mt John Observatory of the University of Canterbury, P.O. Box 56, Lake Tekapo 7945, New Zealand. [www.canterbury.ac.nz](http://www.canterbury.ac.nz)

## Interesting Objects in the Autumn Southern Sky

**Large & Small Clouds of Magellan (LMC & SMC)** appear as two luminous patches below Canopus on autumn evenings, easily seen by eye in a dark sky. They are two galaxies like the Milky Way but much smaller. Each is made of billions of stars. The Large Cloud contains many clusters of young luminous stars seen as patches of light in binoculars and telescopes. The LMC is about 160 000 light years away and the SMC 200 000 l.y away, both very close by for galaxies. (1 light year is about 10 000 billion km,  $10^{13}$  km.)



**47 Tucanae**, looks like a faint fuzzy star just below the SMC. It is a globular cluster, a ball of millions of stars. A telescope is needed to see a peppering of stars around the edge of the cluster. Though it appears near the SMC it is one-tenth the distance, 15 000 light years away, and is has no connection to the Small Cloud. Globular clusters are mostly very old, 10 billion years or more; at least twice the age of the sun. **Omega Centauri**, above and left of the Pointers, is similar but larger than 47 Tucanae, around 17 000 light years away.



**Tarantula nebula** is a glowing gas cloud in the LMC. The gas glows in the ultra-violet light from a cluster of very hot stars at centre of the nebula. The cloud is about 800 light years across. It is easily seen in binoculars and can be seen by eye on moonless nights. This nebula is one of the brightest known. If it was as close as the Orion nebula (in The Pot's handle or Orion's sword) then it would be as bright as the full moon. The nebula is glowing in ultra-violet light from very hot, massive newly-formed stars in the region.

**Canopus** is the second brightest star after Sirius. It is 14 000 times brighter than the sun and 300 light years away. The planets Venus and Jupiter, and sometimes Mars, are brighter.

**Alpha Centauri**, the brighter and lower Pointer, is the closest naked-eye star: 4.3 light-years away. Alpha Cen is a binary star: two stars about the same size as the sun orbiting around each other in 80 years. A telescope magnifying 50x will split the pair. (A very faint and slightly closer star, Proxima Centauri, orbits a quarter of a light-year, or 15 000 Sun-earth distances, from Alpha.)

**Coalsack nebula** is a cloud of dust and gas about 600 light years away, dimming the more distant stars in the Milky Way. Many similar 'dark nebulae' can be seen, appearing as slots and holes in the Milky Way. These clouds of dust and gas eventually coalesce into clusters of stars.

**The Jewel Box** is a compact cluster of young luminous stars about 7000 light years away. The cluster formed less than 10 million years ago. To the eye it looks like a faint star.



**Eta Carinae nebula** is a glowing gas cloud about 8000 light years away. The golden star in the cloud, visible in binoculars, is Eta Carinae. (Eta is the Greek 'e'.) It is estimated to be to be 60 times heavier than the sun and more than a million times brighter but is dimmed by dust clouds around it. It is expected to explode as a supernova any time in the next few thousand years. Many star clusters are found in this part of the sky.

The **Theta Carinae cluster** of stars is at one point of the 'Diamond Cross'. It is also called the 'Five of Diamonds' cluster, the reason obvious when viewed in a telescope. The cluster is about 500 light years away and is around 10 million years old.

**NGC 2516** is right of the False Cross. To the eye it looks like a faint comet. It is a nice sight in binoculars. The cluster is about 1200 light years away.