

MAY MEI SKY GUIDE

Coma Berenices

This dim constellation was originally part of Leo and depicted the tuft of hair at the end of the lion's tail. It became its own constellation in the 16th century, but the connection to hair remained. It's named after Queen Berenice II who promised to sacrifice her long, beautiful hair if her husband, Ptolemy III, returned safely from battle.

Ptolemy did indeed return and Berenice stuck to her promise. She cut off her hair and placed it at the shrine as an offering, but when she returned the following day it was gone. The court astronomer explained that her offering had been taken by the gods and placed in the sky, showing her the stars that were made from her hair.

While the stars in Coma Berenice aren't very bright, the constellation has a lot of deep space objects. This is due to its proximity to Virgo, which holds the Virgo Supercluster, an amalgamation of galaxies loosely held together by gravity. It is also the location of the galactic north pole, which is simply "up" in our galaxy.

To see this constellation, find Leo and the bright star Arcturus in Boötes, which are both near the Northern Horizon. Coma Berenice takes up the space between Leo and Arcturus. The brightest star in Coma Berenice is Diadem, which is, fittingly, a type of crown or tiara.



Urania's Mirror - Boötes, Canes Venatici, Coma Berenices, and Quadrans Muralis by Sidney Hall. 

What is a Meteor?

Meteors are related to flashes of light which you sometimes see streaking across the sky. We often call these shooting stars, but in fact they're not stars at all! Meteors begin as meteoroids, which are essentially space rocks – objects in space that range in size from dust grains to rocks up to about one metre in diameter.

Meteoroids are created when asteroids, which are much larger, collide into each other, causing small pieces to break off. When meteoroids enter the Earth's atmosphere (or the atmosphere of another planet) at high speed they burn up. They are now called meteors, and produce the streak of light that we see in the sky. If the meteor manages to survive its trip through the atmosphere and land on Earth, it is called a meteorite.

Meteor showers occur as Earth's orbit around the sun crosses paths with the orbit of a comet, which is made of ice and dust. The orbits of comets are usually asymmetrical rather than circular, and as the comet gets closer to the sun its icy surface evaporates, releasing rock particles. This debris is scattered along the comet's path, and when Earth encounters this path we experience meteor showers.

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THE SKY TONIGHT



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