The pattern of the Big Dipper is one of the most recognizable in the night sky. It looks like a big soup ladle. Look toward the Northeast. At the beginning of May the Dipper is standing on its handle. By the end of the month the Dipper is high overhead and the bowl is upside down in the sky. The Big Dipper has seven stars, three in the handle and four in the bowl. There is a Native American story that sees these stars as an animal they call Fisher. Fisher is a large fox-like animal. Once there was a winter that did not end, spring came, and it was still snowy and cold. Fisher told the people that summer would not come until the birds of summer returned, but they were being held captive by an evil chieftain. The people and animals made a plan to free the birds. One night they went to the land of the evil chieftain and released all the birds of summer. The evil chieftain heard them, everyone escaped except for Fisher. Fisher ran up a tall tree with the chieftain right behind him. When Fisher got to the top of the tree, he jumped into the sky country. We can see him there still with his tail pointing back down to Earth.

Did you notice that I didn’t call the Big Dipper a constellation? That’s because it is not a constellation. There are 88 official constellations in the night sky and the Big Dipper isn’t one of them. We call patterns like the Big Dipper asterisms. Asterisms are patterns that are not one of the 88 official constellations but recognizable patterns coming from a more modern cultural reference. In other cultures, these seven stars have been seen as a plough, a wagon, a jaguar and a bear.

The Big Dipper is part of the constellation called Ursa Major, one of the official 88 constellations and the third largest constellation in the night sky. Ursa Major is Latin for the “Greater Bear.” Many cultures on Earth have associated these stars with the figure of a bear. In nearly every Native American Indian tribe bears figure prominently in their mythology. In most of these cultures the bear is considered to be a medicine being with very impressive magical powers. Bears are symbols of strength and wisdom and are often associated with healing and medicine as it is believed they can heal their own wounds.