SJAA Ephemeris Bulletin

Oct 2026

Halloween Deep-Sky Targets

by Joe Fragola

The late Jim Van Nuland, a longtime SJAA program lead for the School Star Party program, observed a memorable Halloween tradition that brought astronomy directly into his neighborhood. After years of coordinating telescope nights for students, he recognized that October 31 offered another natural opportunity for public outreach: children were already outside after dark, accompanied by parents and moving from house to house. By setting up a telescope or tripod-mounted binoculars in the driveway, he could give families an unexpected look at the night sky while they made their trick-or-treating rounds.

The idea was intentionally simple and welcoming. Visitors could pause for a brief view of a celestial "treat" before receiving the more familiar candy treat. The observing list emphasized deep-sky objects with names suited to the season, turning galaxies, nebulae, and star clusters into part of the Halloween atmosphere. That playful theme made the encounter approachable for children while giving parents an easy way to share in the experience and ask questions about what they were seeing.

Even the candy reinforced the astronomy connection: Mars Bars, Milky Way Bars, and Starburst Chews are especially fitting choices. On years when the Moon is visible, it naturally would become the primary target because its bright, detailed surface was easy for first-time observers to appreciate. In that way, the activity did not depend on a long observing session or specialized knowledge. For Halloween, 2026 the 3rd Quarter Moon won't rise until late evening (11:30 pm).

A few minutes at the eyepiece could transform an ordinary stop for candy into a personal introduction to astronomy—and demonstrate how public outreach can begin with something as modest as a telescope in a driveway. Don't give long explanations which would hold kids from moving on to score the next candy giveaway. Invite them to return later once their trick-or-treating wraps up.

So this Halloween, let the Moon sleep in, let the ghosts and owls come out, and give your neighbors a treat they won't find in a candy bowl: a live view of the spooky, sparkling universe overhead. Whether you bag a ghost, chase a phantom, or simply share the Owl Cluster with a trick-or-treater, Halloween night is a perfect reminder that the sky is full of treats for anyone willing to look up.

Here is a list of Halloween-themed deep sky targets in case you'd like to give this public outreach idea a try this year.

Saturn This is the evening's prime target and the most likely to draw gasps from visitors. Even at modest magnification, first-time observers can see the planet's golden disk and its famous ring system.

Binoculars/Small Telescopes

The targets on this list are bright enough to be easily visible with modest optical equipment from light polluted skies.

NGC 457 Owl / E.T. Cluster (open star cluster in Cassiopeia)

Messier 15 Great Pegasus Cluster (globular star cluster in Pegasus)

Messier 2 Globular star cluster in Aquarius

Double Cluster NGC 869 & NGC 884 (pair of open star clusters in Perseus)

Messier 27 Dumbbell Nebula (planetary nebula in Vulpecula)

Smart Telescopes

Rather than jumping from object to object, remain on the same target to capture more detail over time. Starting early and accumulating data throughout the evening will produce the most detailed final image—and offers the best chance of hearing a few "oohs," "aahs," and "wows" from trick-or-treaters and their families.

NGC 6960 Witch's Broom (supernova remnant in Cygnus)

NGC 404 Mirach's Ghost (elliptical galaxy in Andromeda)

NGC 6741 The Phantom Streak (planetary nebula in Aquila)

NGC 6781 Ghost of the Moon Nebula (planetary nebula in Aquila)

NGC 5829 The Spider Galaxy (spiral galaxy in Boötes)

NGC 246 The Skull Nebula (planetary nebula in Cetus)

NGC 6369 Little Ghost Nebula (planetary nebula in Ophiuchus)

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SJAA Oct 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 71%	2 59%	3 Starry Nights Star Party 7:45PM 48%
4 FixIt, Solar, Loaner, Library 2:00PM Saturn at Opposition 36%	5 Neil deGrasse Tyson's Birthday (1958) 25%	6 16%	7 Free Public Talk on Earth 2.0 7:00PM 9%	8 3%	9 Astro 101 Public Talk 6:15PM In Town Star Party (ITSP) 7:30PM 1%	10 Mendoza Ranch Member Observing 6:00PM New Moon 0%
11 2%	12 Joseph D. Grant Park - Member Observing 6:00PM Mercury at Greatest Eastern Elongation 5%	13 Astro 101 Beginners' Forum 7:00PM 11%	14 17%	15 Astro 101 Online 7:00PM 25%	16 33%	17 42%
18 52%	19 Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar's Birthday (1910) 61%	20 70%	21 Astro 101: Women In Astronomy (online) 7:00PM 79%	22 Astro 101 Online 7:00PM 87%	23 93%	24 Board Mtg 6:00PM Guest Speaker 8:00PM 97%
25 100%	26 Full Moon 99%	27 97%	28 91%	29 84%	30 74%	31 Halloween 63%

Times and dates are subject to change. Please check sjaa.net and www.meetup.com/sj-astronomy for the latest updates.

Meteor Shower

Dark Sky Window