

October Skies: Dragons, Orion, and the Hunter's Moon

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October arrives in Mason Valley with noticeably longer nights and cooler evenings, but the heavens are anything but quiet. This month brings two meteor showers, an excellent opportunity to see the Milky Way without a telescope, the return of familiar winter stars to the morning sky, and a brilliant Hunter's Moon near the end of the month.

For those who have been following the Milky Way through the summer, October offers another chance before its brightest summer regions begin slipping toward the western horizon. On a dark, moonless October evening, look high overhead for the familiar Summer Triangle—Vega, Deneb, and Altair. Although its name says “summer,” the triangle remains prominent during autumn evenings. The Milky Way passes directly through this part of the sky, appearing to the naked eye as a pale, hazy band of light.¹

October's best Milky Way viewing comes around the New Moon on October 10 at 8:50 a.m. Pacific time. The Moon reaches Third Quarter on October 3, First Quarter on October 18, and becomes full on the evening of October 25 at 9:11 p.m. Those moonless evenings around October 8 through 12 should provide some of the month's darkest skies.²

And October wastes no time providing something special.

The Draconid meteor shower is active during the first part of the month and is expected to be best on the evening of October 8 into the early hours of October 9. Unlike most meteor showers, which are usually best after midnight, the Draconids are unusual because their radiant point is highest during the evening hours. That means you do not necessarily have to stay awake until two or three in the morning to see them.³

The timing could hardly be better in 2026. New Moon comes on October 10, so there will be very little moonlight to interfere with the Draconids. Under a genuinely dark sky, observers might see around 10 meteors per hour near the predicted peak, although meteor showers never guarantee a particular number.³

There is another reason astronomers keep an eye on the Draconids. Most years they are modest. But occasionally the shower surprises everyone with sudden bursts of activity. The parent comet, 21P/Giacobini-Zinner, leaves behind the material that creates these meteors when Earth encounters its debris stream. No extraordinary outburst is promised for 2026, but the Draconids have a history of occasionally doing much more than expected.³

For Yerington observers, this is a wonderfully convenient meteor shower: find a dark place on the evening of October 8,

face generally north, get comfortable, and simply watch the sky. No telescope is needed.

Later in October comes the month's better-known meteor shower: the Orionids.

The Orionids are produced by debris from one of the most famous objects in astronomy—Halley's Comet. Earth passes through material left along the comet's orbit each autumn, and the tiny particles enter our atmosphere at roughly 41 miles per second, producing swift meteors.⁴

The Orionids are active through much of October and into November, with their 2026 maximum expected around October 22–23. In an ordinary year, observers under ideal conditions might see around 10 to 20 Orionid meteors per hour near maximum.⁴

Unfortunately, the Moon will interfere this year. A bright waxing gibbous Moon will illuminate much of the night around the peak. The best opportunity should come during the hours after the Moon sets and before dawn, when the sky becomes temporarily darker. Even with moonlight, some of the brighter Orionids should still be visible.⁴

There is something especially satisfying about watching an Orionid streak across the sky and realizing that the tiny bit of material creating that flash was once part of Halley's Comet. The comet itself will not return to the inner solar system until

2061, but every October Earth encounters part of the trail it left behind.

Meanwhile, another meteor shower quietly begins its long autumn appearance. The Southern Taurids are active throughout October. They normally produce relatively few meteors, but the Taurids are famous for occasionally producing unusually bright fireballs. Their main 2026 peak comes in early November, but a bright, slow-moving meteor seen during an October evening could belong to this stream.⁵

October also marks a major change in the planetary sky. Venus, which has been our brilliant evening companion during summer and early fall, disappears into the Sun's glare. On October 23–24, Venus passes between Earth and the Sun in what astronomers call inferior conjunction. Afterward, Venus begins its transition from the evening sky into the morning sky.⁶

Then, as October approaches its end, the Moon takes center stage.

The Full Moon occurs at 9:11 p.m. Pacific time on October 25 for the Yerington area. This is traditionally called the Hunter's Moon, the full Moon following the Harvest Moon. The name recalls the season when communities historically prepared for winter by hunting and preserving food.⁷

The best spectacle may actually come before the Moon becomes precisely full. Watch for it rising in the east around

sunset on October 25. When a full or nearly full Moon sits close to the horizon, it often looks enormous against familiar hills, trees, and buildings. That apparent enormous size is an optical effect known as the “Moon illusion,” but knowing that does not make the sight any less impressive.

October also begins revealing another seasonal change. While Vega, Deneb, and Altair remain in the evening sky, Capella begins appearing prominently in the northeast. Capella is one of the brightest stars in the entire night sky and belongs to the constellation Auriga the Charioteer. Its return to our autumn evenings is one of those quiet signals that winter's sky is on its way.⁸

So October skies over Yerington offer something almost every week: the Milky Way during the dark nights around New Moon, the unusual evening Draconids on October 8, the Orionids from Halley's Comet later in the month, occasional Taurid fireballs, Venus changing from an evening to a morning planet, and finally the Hunter's Moon rising over Mason Valley.

Summer's sky is slowly departing, winter's stars are beginning to arrive, and for a few weeks in October we can enjoy a little of both.

Bring a chair. Find a dark spot. Maybe bring a jacket this time.

And look up.

Footnotes

1. EarthSky, “Summer Triangle and galactic equator,” explaining that Vega, Deneb, and Altair remain high on October evenings and that the Summer Triangle can be used to locate the Milky Way, which is visible to the naked eye under dark skies:
<https://earthsky.org/tonight/use-summer-triangle-to-locate-flat-plane-of-milky-way/>
2. Time and Date, “Moonrise, Moonset, and Moon Phase in Reno, October 2026,” listing Third Quarter on October 3 at 6:25 a.m., New Moon on October 10 at 8:50 a.m., First Quarter on October 18 at 9:12 a.m., and Full Moon on October 25 at 9:11 p.m., Pacific time:
<https://www.timeanddate.com/moon/usa/reno?month=10>
3. EarthSky, “Draconid meteor shower 2026: All you need to know,” giving the predicted peak during the evening of October 8 into October 9, favorable moon conditions, an expected rate of around 10 meteors per hour under ideal conditions, and explaining the unusual evening visibility of the shower:
<https://earthsky.org/astronomy-essentials/everything-you-need-to-know-draconid-meteor-shower/>
4. American Meteor Society, “Meteor Showers 2026–2027,” listing the Orionids as active in October and early November, with a 2026 peak in late October, normal rates of approximately 10 to 20 meteors per hour, high meteor velocities, the parent body 1P/Halley, and substantial moonlight interference during the 2026 maximum:
<https://www.amsmeteors.org/meteor-showers/meteor-shower-calendar/>
5. American Meteor Society, “2026/2027 Meteor Shower Calendar,” describing the Southern Taurids as active from September into November and noting their reputation for producing fireballs:
<https://www.amsmeteors.org/calendar/>
6. EarthSky, “Inferior conjunction of planet Venus on October 23–24, 2026,” explaining that Venus passes between Earth and the Sun at inferior conjunction and subsequently emerges into the morning sky:
<https://earthsky.org/astronomy-essentials/inferior-conjunction-venus-between-sun-and-earth/>
7. The Old Farmer’s Almanac, “Full Hunter’s Moon October 2026,” explaining the Hunter’s Moon name and giving the 2026 date of the October Full Moon:
<https://www.almanac.com/content/full-moon-october>

8. EarthSky, “Auriga the Charioteer and bright Capella on October evenings,” describing bright Capella appearing in the northeastern evening sky during October:

<https://earthsky.org/constellations/closeup-on-auriga/>

I particularly like October because the Draconids on October 8 are unusually accessible—they favor evening viewing rather than the predawn hours, and the nearly new Moon gives Yerington unusually favorable conditions in 2026. The later Orionids are intrinsically stronger, but moonlight will make them more challenging this year. [EarthSky](#)