

Look for monsters in sky

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

This week is Halloween, the annual celebration of things ghoulish. Speaking of ghoulish, that word reminds me of one of my favorite quotes from an old Scottish prayer book, “From ghoulies and ghosties, and long legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night, good Lord deliver us.”

The modern concept of Halloween is a transmogrification of ancient Celtic rituals centered on Samhain which is a cross-quarter day—a day that is roughly halfway between an equinox and a solstice.

If you want to get technically sticky about it, that date this year will be Wednesday, Nov. 6, at 11:07 p.m. MST, and in spite of what the Hallmark greeting cards and some books show there will not be a full moon on Halloween.

If you want a full moon on Halloween you will have to wait until the year 2020.

In any case, in addition to the little monsters going from door-to-door soliciting candy in your neighborhood, there are also a few monsters in the sky.

The first is the constellation Draco, the Dragon which is located in the northern sky. You can find it by looking for the Big and Little Dippers.

On Halloween evening the Big Dipper will be very close to the northern horizon and the Little Dipper will be directly above it. Draco extends from a lopsided rectangle up and left of the Little Dipper in a chain of stars that wind down and between the dippers indicating the beasties body.

Another celestial monster is Cetus, the Whale. Cetus is often associated with the Perseus/Andromeda story as the sea monster that was supposed to kill Andromeda when she was chained to the rocks.

To find this “beastie” look just above the southwest horizon at about 9 p.m. on Halloween evening. The constellation extends from a circlet of stars on the left to a large, slightly misshaped and elongated rectangle.

If you are having difficulty finding it, find the “V” shape of Taurus, the Bull and go right.

While not necessarily associated with any “beastie,” another celestial item associated with things ghoulish is the small star cluster, Pleiades.

Many cultures around the world have traditions associated with honoring the dead each year, and many of them include the Pleiades. Who would have thought something so small could be associated with things so sinister? This small cluster can be found in the south at midnight on Halloween.

COMET UPDATE: Comet ISON is slowly pulling away from the planet Mars in the east before sunrise. The comet is moving east—or down—in relation to the planet. It will continue to brighten as the month progresses. If you have a telescope you might be able to find it, but it has yet to show up in binoculars.

SKY WATCH: New Moon on Sunday, Nov. 3; don't forget to change your clocks BACK one hour on Sunday morning, Nov. 3, to return to normal time.

On Wednesday, Nov. 6, there will be a conjunction of a slender crescent moon, the planet Venus, and the Lagoon and Trifid nebulae (M8 and M20 respectively). It will probably be best viewed in binoculars at about 6 p.m.