

Offered Title: It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like...

The onslaught has begun in earnest. Sure, I noticed tell-tale signs beginning to appear way back in September but after Halloween...well, here it comes!

So, since we're gently being nudged into a holiday mood, let's talk about gifts for your budding astronomer.

Good binoculars. Binoculars are the most versatile of gifts. They are a great way to magnify celestial objects, birds, bees, butterflies, foxes, deer, sporting events, the opera, theater. A good starting point is the popular 10x40 or 10x42 binocular. They are reasonably light and show a nice, bright field of view. A magnification of 10x is enough to catch many nebulae, star clusters, moons of Jupiter, etc. without being too shaky. Hand holding a binocular with higher than 10x magnification invites frustration and that's what we are trying to avoid. Another good choice is a 10x50 binocular. They provide a brighter view but weigh more so consider the frustration (fatigue) factor.

Binoculars generally come in two forms, Porro prism or roof prism. The prism yields a correct up-down and left-right view. Porro prism binoculars are bulkier than roof prism but cost less for the same quality. Expect to pay \$100+ for decent binoculars.

Spotting Scope. This is also a great way of introducing someone to astronomy. It's like having a telescope but easier to use for a beginner. They are typically prismatic like binoculars, but a few companies outfit small telescopes to perform as spotting scopes. A spotting scope's view is correct up-down and left-right. They have variable magnification (usually up to 60x), are compact, and ready for mounting on a tripod. The advantage of a small telescope set up as a spotting scope is it can be set up as a telescope too! Some will accept 90-degree diagonals, standard 1.25" eyepieces, and accessories. Expect to pay \$200+ for a decent spotting scope. If your budget allows, get one that has the letters "ED". This indicates specialty glass for clearer views.

VR. Virtual Reality is getting really good. Some systems and apps go beyond games and can show realistic views of the night sky where you can zoom in on an object of interest. Take a tour of our solar system, dive into the heart of a star, travel beyond our Milky Way. Better VR starts at around \$200.

Software. There are numerous well-made computer and smart phone planetarium applications that provide accurate views of the day and night sky. While there are free applications available, the better ones will have a fee but also provide much more content. Expect to pay \$75+.

Books, planet and Moon globes, sky maps, planispheres, other resources. Use online sources such as Sky and Telescope magazine and Astronomy Magazine. Go to their websites to shop or get ideas.

What's in the Sky?

November 15; evening; south: The First Quarter Moon and Mars get close.

November 17-18; pre-dawn; east: The weak Leonid meteor shower peaks.