

What Planets Can We See Tonight?

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One of the most common questions posed by visitors to the CPRC Community Observatory is “What planets can we see tonight?” Weather permitting; this January is a good month for viewing Saturn and Mars. Both planets will be observable during the observatory’s weekend operating hours of 7:30 PM – 9:30 PM. Here is a short summary of where the planets in our solar system can be viewed this month.

Mercury - The elusive but bright planet Mercury may be viewed in bright early dawn skies during the middle of this month, but will not be visible in early January. Look for the star-like object low in the southeast skies, nearly on the horizon about 40 minutes before sunrise. On January 10th, look for a very thin crescent moon rising in the southwest horizon slightly below and to the right of Mercury in the twilight sky.

Venus - Our sister planet Venus will not be visible during the first month of 2010. It will be hidden by the glare of the sun and will not be visible until mid-February when it will emerge in the early evening skies. Even then it will be buried in very bright skies at dusk.

Mars - After a long hiatus, Mars the red planet, finally returns in showcase form, rising at about 9:00 PM in early January. By the end of this month, Mars will be high in the sky during the Observatory’s open hour and favorably placed for viewing through our telescopes. On the 29th, Mars will rise almost the same time the sun sets and will be highest overhead at midnight. For those who rise early, Mars will set at about the time the sun rises.

Jupiter - Looking west about a half hour after sunset, the first bright yellow star-like object visible in these January evenings will be Jupiter, still hanging around after putting on a nice show in 2009. As the month progresses, Jupiter will be setting behind the southwest horizon earlier each night until late January, at which time it will become lost in the twilight glow.

Saturn - Our ringed planet (but appearing more or less "without rings") will be one of the dominant planets for night-long viewing this month. Rising about 10:30 PM at the beginning of January, it is high overhead by early morning. By the end of the month Saturn, appearing as a bright yellow "star" will rise before 9:00 PM and be visible nearly all night long. This month is an excellent time to view Saturn. The famous rings are tilted so that they appear “edge-on” from our viewpoint on Earth, rendering them nearly invisible. Viewing this magnificent spectacle in the observatory telescope reveals a thin straight line crossing Saturn's equator tilted less than five degrees to us and stretching off to each side.

Uranus - This distant planet is now visible in western twilight and sets only about one hour after Neptune and Jupiter. This blue-green “star-like” object can be viewed through the telescopes at the observatory.

Neptune – Fainter still and west of Uranus, the distant planet Neptune is very low in southwestern skies during early evening hours and is located very close to Jupiter throughout the month, but not as close as in December. Note that Neptune and Jupiter will set at about the same time this month and is in such strong evening twilight it is likely not visible in telescopes after mid-month.

Pluto “The Dwarf Planet” – Is now hidden completely by the glare of the sun and is not visible for several months when it will reappear as a morning object in late spring.

Please visit the community observatory this month to learn more about these and other heavenly objects visible in the January skies. Admission is free, but donations at the observatory are always welcome. For more information about the observatory, driving directions and closure information please go to www.communityobservatory.com