Ursids 2026: why the Moon spoils it and what to look at instead

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The Ursids peak the night of 21–22 December 2026 under a 95% Moon, so our verdict is quiet. Why, and the Moon, Saturn and morning planets to see instead.

The Ursid meteor shower peaks on the night of Monday 21 into Tuesday 22 December 2026, by the American Meteor Society's calendar. It is a small shower, about 10 an hour at best from a perfect sky, and this year the Moon is 95% lit and up for most of the night. Our verdict is "quiet": not worth a special trip. Look at the Moon itself instead, or at Saturn in the evening and three planets before breakfast. Peabody's Ursids page keeps every year's peak, and Sky Tonight gives your own times from a ZIP that never leaves your phone.

Why the Moon spoils it

Most shooting stars are faint. A bright Moon lights up the whole sky the way a streetlight does, and the faint ones simply vanish into it. On 21 December the Moon is a waxing gibbous, nearly full, rising in the early afternoon and setting around dawn. In Denver, Peabody's sky table has it rising at about 2:09 pm and setting at about 5:40 the next morning, so there is no dark stretch of night at all.

Peabody's verdict is a small sum, not a feeling. It takes the shower's rate at its peak (the American Meteor Society's number, 10 an hour for the Ursids) and cuts it by how much of a bright Moon is in the way. A 10-an-hour shower under a 95% Moon comes out at about two an hour, which is "quiet". The same sum gives the Geminids, a week earlier, "great".

Why the Ursids are small anyway

The Ursids come from dust left by Comet 8P/Tuttle. Its trail is thin where Earth crosses it, so even in a dark year the rate is modest. The streaks point back to Ursa Minor, the Little Dipper, which from most of the United States never sets: it just circles the North Star all night. That makes the Ursids one of the few showers you could, in principle, watch from dusk to dawn. In 2026 the Moon gets there first.

What to look at instead

The solstice week is a good week for the sky; it just isn't a shooting-star week.

- The Moon. Almost full, high in the east at 7 pm. Binoculars on a gibbous Moon show craters along the shadowed edge. The Moon is full on the evening of 23 December, the closest full Moon of the year, about 356,700 km away.
- Saturn. In the evening it sits in the south, about five fists up, steady and creamy-yellow.

Peabody's table calls it "easy to see".

• Three planets before breakfast. At about 5:30 am, Jupiter and Mars are high in the south-west, near six fists up, Jupiter much the brighter of the two. Venus is low in the south-east, about two fists up, the brightest point in the sky.

• The longest night. The winter solstice is 21 December at 1:50 pm Mountain Time. The solstice page has a tape-on-the-window activity for marking where the Sun sets.

If you go out anyway

Face north, lie back, and give it twenty minutes. Turn so the Moon is behind you, and use a house or a tree to hide it if you can. Count every streak, from any direction. One or two is a fair result for a quiet shower, and a child who saw one has a story for breakfast.

The better shower

The Geminids peak on 13–14 December 2026 with a thin crescent Moon that sets around 9 pm. If you plan one meteor night this winter, make it that one. The Quadrantids on 3–4 January 2027 are rated "great" too, but they ask for a cold, early morning.

Three questions grown-ups ask

Is the Ursids' peak ever good? Yes. In 2027 the Moon on the peak night is a 31% waning crescent; it still comes out "quiet", because the shower is small, but the sky is darker.

Why do showers come on the same dates every year? Earth crosses the same comet's dust trail at the same point in its orbit, so the dates repeat.

Do we need a telescope for Saturn? To see it as a bright, steady dot, no: eyes are enough. The rings need a telescope, and Saturn's own page says what they are.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up. After a cold look at the Moon, the library has stories to read under the blanket, at your child's reading level.

Sources

• American Meteor Society, meteor shower calendar 2026–2027: the peak night and the rate.

• The Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and Venus come from Peabody's own sky table, worked out with astronomy-engine (MIT license) for Denver; times move a little elsewhere.

• NASA, meteors and meteorites.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/ursids-2026