

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Year

AVIATION & SPACE OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES FOR 2026

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Several “round number” anniversaries in Space exploration occur in 2026. They provide a wonderful opportunity to both guide your own investigation of interesting events and engage a wide variety of audiences in learning about various aspects of learning about Space, and about the process of scientific inquiry. I’ve listed a few below I think are particularly valuable, followed by a roster of other anniversary dates you might find useful in sharing your knowledge and passion for learning about the amazing Universe around us.

The discovery of Ceres and why Pluto got “demoted.”

NOTE: I disagree strenuously with Alan Stern on this issue. He (understandably) wants Pluto to have full Planetary Status; I believe the IAU’s decision is a tailor-made opportunity to illustrate how the Process of Scientific Inquiry operates. And we have a head start in the engagement process because almost everyone has an opinion on “poor little Pluto.”

- Ceres was discovered 225 years ago on January 1, 1801, the first day of the 19th Century, by Giuseppe Piazza. He made a set of observations through January 24, which allowed famed mathematician Karl Gauss to calculate its orbit, which allowed ...
- Astronomers Baron von Zach and Heinrich Olbers to find it again, on December 31, 1801. What a nice set of bookends to one year!
- Astronomers had noticed a semi-mathematical spacing (“Bode’s Law”) of the known planets, with a “gap” between Mars and Jupiter, right where Ceres orbit lay. But Ceres was much smaller than the known planets, so the search was on for other objects that distance from the Sun. Other small bodies were found over the next few years, likely either the remains of a disrupted planet or material that somehow failed to coalesce into a planet. Either way, Ceres et al. were sufficiently different to warrant a new category of Solar System bodies, joining “planets,” “moon,” and “comets.” The term “asteroid” was given to them, rather inappropriate because they were not “little stars,” but it the stage for having a more-open nomenclature for Solar System objects.
- Other asteroid anniversaries in 2026 could be tied to this topic, including, the launch of *New Horizons* of course (20th anniversary on 1/19/2006), the landing of *NEAR Shoemaker* on Eros (25th anniversary on 2/12/2001), the 35th anniversary of the first asteroid fly-by, of Gaspra while *Galileo* was *en route* to Jupiter, 10/29/91), and...

- The discovery of Uranus (245th anniversary on 3/13/1781) and the discovery of Neptune (180th anniversary on 9/23/1846). Both of these events could, of course, rate their own presentation.
- Pluto was discovered on February 18, 1930, 95 years ago (an astonishing omission on my part for the SPACE 365 database, especially given that I once sent a fan letter to Clyde Tombaugh and got a nice letter in return!) Walt Disney soon created a dog for Mickey Mouse and named him after the new “planet.” WD denied the connection, but a former illustrator of Disney spilled the tea on his deathbed. (The connection was obvious, anyway.)
- The IAU’s position was that the discovery of other trans-Neptunian objects, like the discovery of Ceres, required a new category of Solar System object, since no rational description of them (and Ceres) would keep Pluto a “planet,” yet bar the newcomers. It was never going to be “nine again,” it had to be either 8 or “many and counting.” Thus, Science marches on. My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos.

The *Challenger* Disaster

(40th anniversary: 1/28/1986): The media and the public will certainly make note of this date, and I reckon that the SSA team will have to deal with that. I’m guessing you are already on top of the issue of how the SSA team should handle this particular date...

Robert Goddard

The 100th anniversary (3/16/1926) of the first launch of a liquid-fueled rocket was a watershed event in Space exploration, worthy of support by the SSA team. The media would likely not report on this date, except for it being a 100th anniversary, and with the Moon launch activity likely in 2026 (a topic I strongly suspect NASA will give you guidance about!).

Four Related Anniversary Dates of Importance

April 12, 1961, the 65th anniversary of the first person to fly in Space (and orbit the Earth) Yuri Gagarin; April 12, 1981, exactly 20 years later, the first flight, STS-1, of the Space Shuttle Program; May 5, 1961, the 65th anniversary of Alan Shepard becoming the First American in Space; and May 25, 1961, the 65th anniversary of President Kennedy’s Challenge to “go to the Moon before the decade is out.” A program showcasing the four events could also include the 55th anniversaries of the launch of ***Apollo 14 (1/31/1971)*** and ***Apollo 15 (7/26/1971)***.

The USA at 250

I am sure the media will pay close attention to the festivities surrounding the 250th birthday of the USA, and Space-related activities will likely be part of the programming mix. That was

certainly true for the Bicentennial; *Viking 1*, as you know, was scheduled to land on Mars on July 4, 1976. The dedication of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM) was tied to the Bicentennial celebration, too! The National Mall building was dedicated on July 1, and the ribbon was cut by a replica of the Viking sampler arm, actuated by a signal from the *Viking 1* spacecraft, then in Mars orbit, under the supervision of NASM's first Director, Apollo 11's Michael Collins. I am sure NASA will be all over this connection, and the SSA team could be a major "force multiplier" in the event, especially in making the Moon-Mars connection.

Orville, Gene, and the STTOS Premiere

Orville Wright's birthday, and that of Gene Roddenberry, are exactly 50 years apart; they both would have been 155/80 on August 19. Further, the premiere of the original *Star Trek* was 60 years ago on September 9. I did a piece (**attached**) on their 150/75th, and the importance to society of the First Flight and Star Trek then. Given NASA's long association with the late Nichelle Nichols, and NASM's having the original filming *Enterprise* model on prominent display, this would be the perfect opportunity for SSA programming on the beneficial role NASA technology has had on American society and economy. This is the second opportunity in 2026 for NASA and NASM to work together on public outreach!

NASA and Fire Prevention

Most people don't realize the value of observation from Low Earth Orbit. Alas, that is a difficult topic for NASA today, but there is one effort/benefit that could be worth presenting by the SSA team: the mitigation of wildfire damage through the identification of fire-prone areas. An interesting/engaging confluence of anniversary dates gives us a good start. The Great Chicago Fire (not caused by Mrs. O'Leary's cow!) happened on October 8, 1871, 155 years ago. The much more deadly Peshtigo (Wisconsin) Fire happened on that same day. The 30th anniversary of the infamous Oakland Hills wildfire is on October 20. NASA does/did have a fire prediction program that identified fire-prone areas. NOTE: George Ellery Hale Sr. made a fortune in the rebuilding efforts after the Chicago Fire. His son, GEH Jr., was the financial guy behind the construction of the Yerkes and Palomar Observatories. Connection, connections = engagement!

The Importance of the Science Popularizer

After all, that is the function of the SSA program! Ask someone on the street if they know of a famous astronomer, and most who respond would say Neil deGrasse Tyson. If they are a bit older, they'd say Carl Sagan. If they are young, they might say Emily Calanderelli. All are/were outstanding spokespeople for our Cause. But one of the OG popularizers was Athelstan Spilhaus, who had a science-related piece in the Sunday Funnies for many years, reaching millions weekly. He was a fixture at the AGU and a good scientist, too. SSAs would do well to boost public awareness of these good folks.

Many Round-Number Mars Mission Anniversaries for 2026

There are MANY Mars-related anniversaries in 2026! Each are topics worthy of further study and sharing, and collectively, there are enough to support a year-long set of programs themed around “A Return to the Moon with an Eye Toward Mars,” when combined with news from Artemis II. Presently active spacecraft are in **bold font**.

- [1/19/2006 20th anniversary of the launch of **New Horizons**. While not a round-number anniversary or a Mars mission *per se*, its fly-by of Pluto, giving us our first good look, was **50 years to the day** after *Mariner 4* flew by Mars, giving us our first good look. The engagement value, used by Alan Stern after the Pluto fly-by was huge!]
- 2/18/2021 is the 5th anniversary of the launch of the **Perseverance** rover (and *Ingenuity* helicopter)
- 3/10/2006 is the 20th anniversary of the insertion into Mars orbit of the **Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter**.
- 3/14/2016 is the 10th anniversary of the launch of the partially-successful ExoMars mission.
- 4/7/2001 is the 25th anniversary of the launch of the successful **Mars Odyssey** spacecraft.
- 5/30/1971 is the 55th anniversary of the launch of the fabulously-successful *Mariner 9* orbiter.
- 7/1/1976 is the 50th anniversary of using a signal from *Viking Orbiter 1* to cut the dedication ribbon at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
- 7/20/1976 is the 50th anniversary of the successful landing of *Viking Lander 1*.
- 8/6/1996 is the 30th anniversary of the announcement of the possible discovery of past life in Mars meteorite ALH84001 (see note below)
- 9/3/1976 is the 50th anniversary of the successful landing of *Viking Lander 2*.
- 11/7/1996 is the 30th anniversary of the highly-successful **Mars Global Surveyor** spacecraft.
- 11/13/1971 is the 50th anniversary of *Mariner 9* entering Mars orbit, and radically changing our perceptions about Mars.
- 11/26/2011 is the 15th anniversary of the launch of the highly-successful **Curiosity** rover.
- 11/27/1971 is the 50th anniversary of the crash landing of *Mars 2*, the first spacecraft to reach the martian surface.
- 12/4/1996 is the 30th anniversary of the launch of *Mars Pathfinder*. It became a big hit, largely because NASA’s first Internet-supported mission.

- 12/27/1546 is Tycho Brahe's 480th birthday.
- 12/27/1791 is Johannes Kepler's 455th birthday. Tycho's observations of Mars allowed Kepler to derive his famous Three Laws of Planetary Motion.
- Other missions that could be included are: The *Mars Exploration Rovers*, *Mars Phoenix*, *Mars Orbiter Mission*, **MAVEN**, *InSight*, **Hope**, and **Tianwen-1**.
- Recently-launched *ESCAPADE* is not included because it is presently *en route* to Mars.
- The above missions are listed because they have round-number anniversaries in 2026. We could expand the field of spacecraft covered by our programming as needed.

A link to this particular Item of the Week will remain on the Archive: Past Items page for all of 2026. For the full spreadsheet of aviation/Space anniversaries in 2026 that could potentially be useful, see the Archive: Other Stuff section of the website.

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