

Outside

These 10 Places Have the Darkest Skies in the U.S. for Stargazing

If you're hoping to see thousands of stars, planets, star clusters, meteors, the Andromeda Galaxy, and the Milky Way, we've got you covered at these stunning spots

First it was the moon, then it was cloudy, then it rained. I'd been waiting five days for the Oregon skies to light up. Then around 10:30 on a cold April night, the clouds lifted, and the constellations swung into view. Auriga was already rising in the west, with its brightest star, Capella, gleaming against the black. Leo was directly above me in one direction, the Big Dipper in the other. To the east hung the bright orange star Arcturus.

My daughter and I were in Lake County, Oregon, a region that is savage but lovely, with sagebrush, juniper, and bunch grasses, and several fish and wildlife areas. There are hot springs, 300 species of birds—and world-class dark skies.

Lake County is the westernmost of Oregon's three southeastern counties. The entire parcel of real estate is called the Oregon Outback, or its "empty quarter" because of the sparse population, vast ranges, and high deserts. When we arrived in the area for several days last month, snow still covered the ground down to about 3,000 feet, so high-altitude hiking was out. Instead, we settled for a scramble in an up-to 70-foot-deep ravine aptly named Crack in the Ground near Christmas Valley, in the northern part of the county. Nighttimes we looked at the skies—or tried to.

If a group of avid astronomers have their way, the combined 11.4 million acres (17,187 square miles) in these counties will become a Dark Skies Sanctuary, a designation for visual quality and remoteness. Pending approval by the Tucson-based nonprofit International Dark Sky Association (IDSA), the area would become the largest officially recognized stargazing sanctuary in the world.

"What we are doing is preserving the best [dark skies] left in the lower 48," said Bob Hackett, executive director of Travel Southern Oregon. The group has submitted a 160-page application to the IDSA for this tract in Oregon to join 17 other locations around the world as official sanctuaries, but many local, state, and federal agencies must sign on first.

Thanks to the social distancing of recent years, stargazing has exploded in popularity even though as much as 80 percent of all Americans have never seen a star-filled sky, according to astronomy.com.

“We are passionate about this,” said Bill Kowalik, a retired geologist who chairs the IDSA’s Oregon chapter. ”The first time you see the Milky Way, you don’t forget it.”

Stargazing is best when there’s a new moon or during meteor showers, such as the Perseids, a prolific annual display associated with the comet Swift–Tuttle, which appears to originate from the constellation Perseus. This year the Perseids should be best seen from July 17 to August 24, peaking around August 13. Another prominent shower, the Delta Aquarids, whose point of origin or radiant is the constellation Aquarius, will peak around July 29 to 30. Together, the two displays should be a good show.

The state’s darkest-sky site, Kowalik said, is in the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge just outside of Lakeview, a town near the California state line. Southern Oregon is smack in the middle of the upcoming annular solar eclipse on October 14. Be aware: savvy travelers are already snapping up lodgings from Crater Lake National Park to the town of Burns, in the Oregon Outback.

Here are nine other great places to see thousands of stars, planets, star clusters, meteors, man-made satellites, the Andromeda Galaxy, and the Milky Way.

3. Cape Lookout National Seashore, Eastern North Carolina

This seashore has three barrier islands—North Core Banks, South Core Banks, and Shackleford Banks—with minimal light pollution. Access is by ferry. There are wild horses to see, birding, a lighthouse to ascend (207 steps), swimming (but no lifeguards) and fishing, and a visitor center on Harker’s Island, where the Crystal Coast Stargazers Astronomy Club has public events. This is the only IDSA-certified site on the Eastern seaboard. Primitive beach camping is allowed on all three of the islands from March–November, but a \$50 beach driving permit is required if you wish to park nearby. The Great Island beach cabins on South Core Banks rent for \$100–\$150/night. Think *very rustic*; and also that what you take in, you must take out, as there’s no trash pick-up there.



Evening approaches at a campsite near beaches and wild horses on the quiet island of Shackleford Banks, Cape Lookout National Seashore, North Carolina (Photo: Frank Staub/Getty)