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Why the World Needs the Night

*A visit to the Appalachian Mountain Club's
International Dark Sky Park*

Laura Poppick



AS A TEENAGER GROWING UP IN THE WOODS OF SOUTHERN NEW YORK, I developed a habit of crawling out my second-floor bedroom window when I couldn't sleep at night. I'd sit perched on the small roof that covered our garage, squint past the snarled branches of our Japanese maple, and orient myself to Ursa Major, Orion, and other familiar characters in the night sky. Each time I did this, a wave of relief would sweep away whatever worries or anxieties had been keeping me awake. Overcome by the vastness of our universe, I'd fall asleep with the comfort of remembering how tiny we all are.

Over the years, one neighbor after another installed floodlights outside their homes. I kept up with my nighttime ritual, but the effects dulled as the stars began to fade away.

This loss, of course, was not unique to my own childhood or the suburb where I grew up. Over the past century and a half of electrified lights, millions of humans have lost access to the solace of the night sky. I traveled to the Appalachian Mountain Club's Maine Woods International Dark Sky Park at the edge of the North Maine Woods in October 2023, where I witnessed what we are missing, and what we can gain back with the flip of a switch.

My tires crunched along a pale dirt logging road as I made my way into the park, past stands of spruce and fir into the 100-Mile Wilderness. I was heading to Medawisla Wilderness Lodge and Cabins, where nearly 100 other star enthusiasts, educators, artists, and musicians were gathering that week to celebrate the night sky at the Second Annual See the Dark Festival. Rain speckled my windshield and looked persistent in the forecast over the following few days, but I remained hopeful that the clouds would break long enough to see some of the darkest skies east of the Mississippi River.

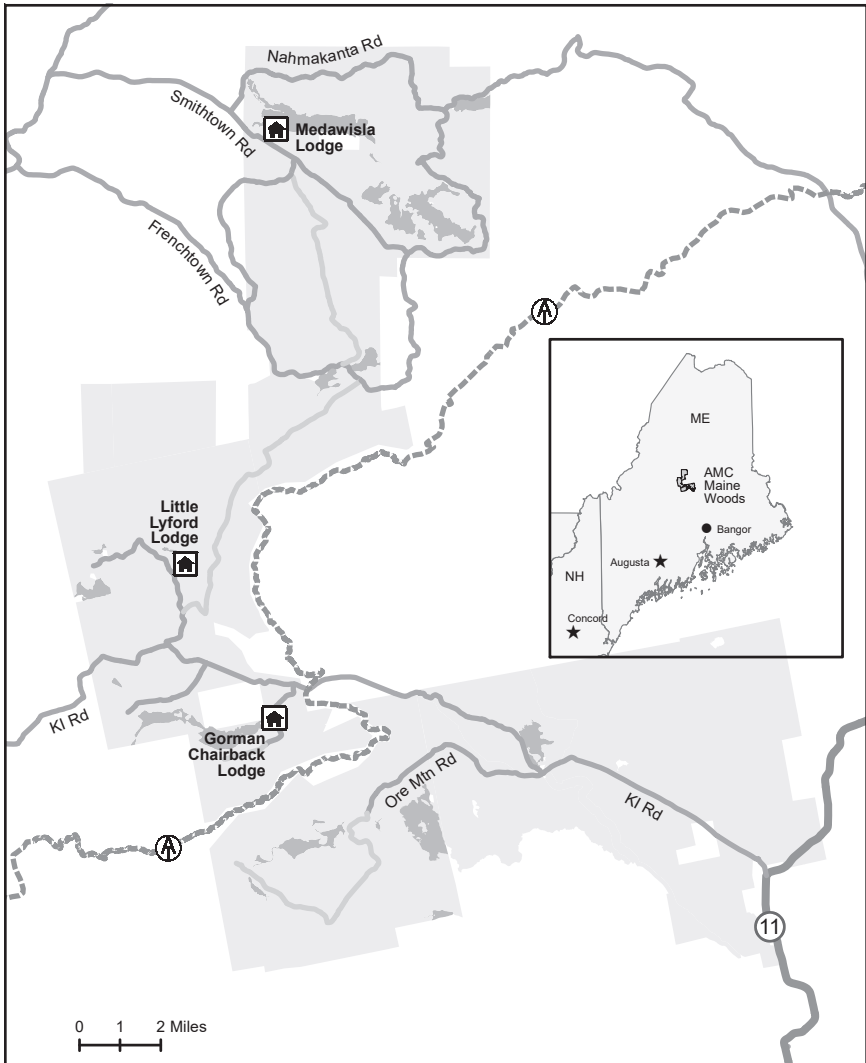
DarkSky International, a nonprofit organization committed to minimizing light pollution worldwide, certified the park in 2021 as an exceptional place to see the night sky. Since then, the park has expanded from 75,000 acres to nearly 115,000 acres. All of the lightbulbs within the core of this region must meet a collection of guidelines established by DarkSky, including being dimly lit, facing downward rather than upward, and having a warm rather than cool hue, among other criteria. The result is a depth of darkness rivaled only by the North Pole.

"I want people to feel this," says Jenny Ward, AMC's director of brand experience, who spearheaded efforts to establish the park in 2020. On clear nights, the frothy splash of the Milky Way appears not unlike it has since the

Nighttime is warm and bright around a campfire under a clear sky at Medawisla Lodge and Cabins. ALLAGASH BREWING COMPANY

Penobscot Nation first made its home here more than 10,000 years ago. “It is a visceral, physiological thing that happens when you see the stars, it’s so incredibly powerful.”

Ward grew up beneath these very skies, but largely took the stars for granted as a kid. It wasn’t until she worked at a sporting camp as a young



The Appalachian Mountain Club's Medawisla, Little Lyford, and Gorman Chairback Lodges are located near Greenville, Maine, within the largest intact temperate forest in North America. For information on staying there, visit [outdoors.org/destinations/maine/](https://www.outdoors.org/destinations/maine/).

LARRY GARLAND/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

adult and witnessed the reactions of campers from more metropolitan areas that she realized how unique their nighttime views were. “I remember thinking, ‘Do they not have these everywhere?’” Ward told me.

The designation of the Dark Sky Park ensures that it remains a refuge for stargazers far into the future. And although guests of AMC’s lodges pay for hearty family-style meals and cozy accommodations, anyone can drop by to see the stars at any time, free of charge.

“This is for everyone to come and enjoy and experience,” Ward says.

The park rests within a larger 10.4-million-acre block of undeveloped land that is the largest intact temperate forest in North America. Artificial light threatens a whole host of ecological activities that take place there, including the nighttime pollination of flowers by moths and the mating and feeding habits of other nocturnal creatures. By limiting light pollution, AMC is helping address these ecological concerns, while ensuring that this remains a place that humans enjoy visiting as well. “It’s like the arms that hug all of the other conservation work we do because it affects everything,” Ward says.

Minimizing light pollution has human health benefits as well. Exposure to cold-hued lights has been associated with increased rates of breast and prostate cancer because they interfere with the production of the sleep hormone melatonin that helps rid our bodies of toxins. Unlike other types of pollution and carcinogens that may take years or decades to clean up, however, light pollution goes away the moment you flick off a switch.

Beyond human and ecological health, dark skies also support the economic health of this region, says Steve Tatko, AMC’s vice president of land, research, and trails. The stars here were once largely an afterthought of the hunters, hikers, fishers, and others who ventured here for outdoor adventures. Now, visitors are increasingly flocking to these woods and waters foremost for the stars.

“You think historically about progress, and it has usually meant bringing development and bringing lights,” Tatko said. “Now people are getting excited about keeping things dark. That’s a major shift.”

This shift has supported tourism in the region and has helped lower electric bills within neighboring communities. With guidance from Ward, the nearby town of Greenville recently retrofitted all its 188 streetlights to warm amber LEDs, and town leaders rewrote ordinances to ensure that all future streetlights and signs abide by rules that limit light pollution. In the first year alone, this shift saved Greenville some \$12,000 in electric bills and has helped preserve the quaint character of the town that, in turn, bolsters tourism revenue.

Just about any way you look at it, limiting light pollution is a win-win-win, Tatko says. It's a win for local community members and visitors, along with the plants and the animals that make their homes here. "It's this way of bringing people that much closer into relation with the land, with each other, and with this common shared past."

Rain continued to patter the roof of Medawisla Lodge on the first night of the festival, as we gathered for a fire-lit meal at long tables decorated with wooden stars and jars filled with twinkle lights that looked like galaxies. I sat with a couple who had driven up from the Boston area with their adult son Deneb, who they told me they had named after the brightest star in the swan-shaped constellation Cygnus.

Throughout that week, dozens of other star enthusiasts would gather at the lodge from as far away as India and Brazil, a testament to the power of stars to connect humans across cultures. People have always had relationships with stars, be it through navigation, timekeeping, the stories of constellations, or knowing when to hunt or fish or grow food.

With the cloud cover still lingering after our dessert of "starberry" shortcake—a mouthwatering mound of stewed strawberries topped with a piece of cake cut out in the shape of a star—we gathered in the cozy nook of the lodge's library for a presentation from John Meader. He directs the Northern Stars Planetarium, a portable planetarium that he totes to school groups across Maine to introduce children to the basics of astronomy. When the occasional student, parent, or teacher asks him why we should care about these celestial bodies, he has them touch their finger to the tip of their nose and reminds them where we all came from. That soft, gummy knob of cartilage that we think of as a nostril, he told us, is actually a collection of stardust.

"When Carl Sagan made the statement that we are star stuff, he wasn't being metaphorical," Meader said in the glow of his presentation. "He was being very literal."

Meader explained how stars gather atoms of hydrogen—the simplest element in the universe—and combine them to form the other elements that make up the world we live in. When stars die and explode as supernovas, their atomsglom together to form some of the heavier materials in the universe, such as the iron in our blood and precious metals like silver and gold.

"If you have a piece of jewelry made of silver or gold, you have a piece of supernova on your body right now," Meader said.

We all shuffled around and took stock of just how intimately our lives were connected with these celestial bodies, in more ways than many of us may have realized when we showed up that day.

After the presentation, we popped outside to check on the sky one more time. Finally, the clouds had parted enough for us to glimpse shimmers of light in the darkness. The Milky Way splashed brightly through Cygnus the Swan. As a kid, I thought Cygnus looked more like the tail of a whale than a swan, so I named it Orca. Whatever you want to call it, I found comfort in seeing that familiar shape exactly as it had appeared when I admired it as a child.

A small group of us craned our necks and marveled as the clouds continued to part. Deneb, the son of the couple from Massachusetts, pointed out Deneb, the brightest star in Cygnus. We searched for other constellations we were familiar with. Cassiopeia, the queen in her throne, and Orion, the hunter with his famous belt.

Shawn Laatsch, the director of the Versant Power Astronomy Center at the University of Maine, Orono, and a presenter at the festival, pulled out a heavy-duty laser pointer and began waving it around to orient us to other features in the sky. Though his background is in the sciences, he later told me that his relationship with stars feels more spiritual than scientific. “I think it makes you understand that there are things beyond us and that we are part of something bigger,” he told me. “I am hopeful that people will look up at the sky and see it as something that binds us together.”

The orange tail of a meteor streaked above us. I threw up my hand and gasped like a child as others turned and saw the light fly across the sky. A few moments later, another light streaked by, to more gasps and excitement. The wind howled through the spruce and fir, pulling along clouds that played a sort of peek-a-boo with the stars, taunting us with reminders of what’s at stake when we lose this view of the night sky, and what we gain when we get it back. Now you see it, now you don’t. Now you do.

After about fifteen minutes of this game of peek-a-boo, the clouds thickened too much to see through, so we made our way back to our cabins. But that bright orange streak still burned through me, a reminder of our origins, a beacon of beauty that can’t help but make you wonder how we all got here and where we’re all going.

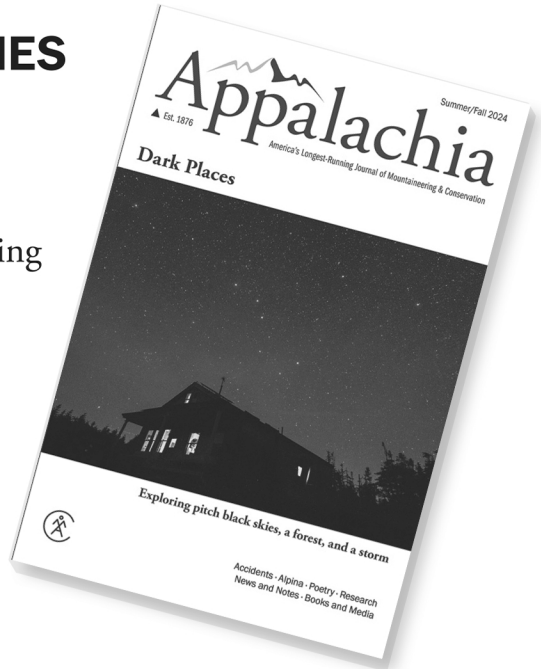
LAURA POPPICK is a freelance science and environmental journalist based in Portland, Maine. She’s at work on *Strata*, a book that explores four key moments that shaped Earth as we know it, which will be published by W. W. Norton & Company.

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