

Oh dem dark skies

Think it's best to see a place on a sunny day?
After dark is when the magic starts

by Sandra Phinney

There's nothing quite like sitting in the Sky Circle at Keji, gazing upwards as a bazillion stars strut their stuff. If you're lucky, a park interpreter will be on hand who will happily tell you about astrology in general, and tales about the constellations in particular, including Mi'kmaw legends.

Keji—short for Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site—is one of those special places in Atlantic Canada that's been designated as a Dark Sky Preserve by the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada.

Located smack in the centre of the southerly hunk of Nova Scotia, Keji is also the first (and still the only) national park to have this dual status, largely because the park's cultural landscape attests to 4,000 years of Mi'kmaq presence in the region.

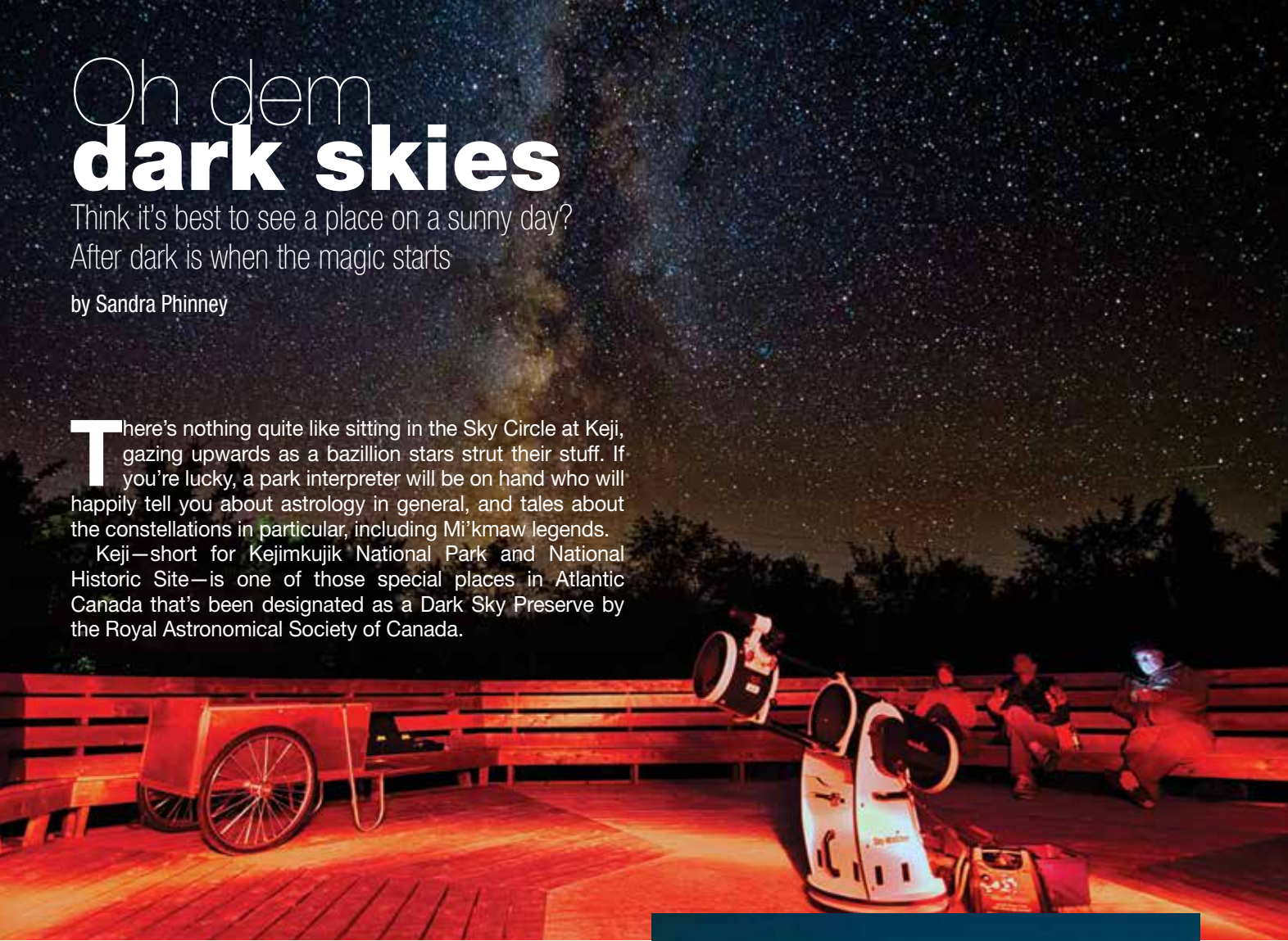
Everyone loves to hear traditional Mi'kmaw tales like the one about Muin (Black Bear) and the Seven Bird Hunters who journeyed around Tatapn (the North Star) creating the seasons. Commonly known as the Big Dipper, this constellation takes on special meaning as the tale unfolds.

After chasing Muin across the horizon all summer and into autumn, four of the birds lose their way, leaving only Robin, Chickadee and Blue Jay on the trail. Robin shoots Black Bear dead with a bow and arrow, then jumps on Bear and becomes cloaked in blood; hence his red breast. Robin flies off, lands on a tree then shakes, turning the leaves red and accounting for the colour of the leaves in autumn. And that's just part of the story!

Colleen Anderson, one of the park's interpretation officers, enjoys telling tales like this to visitors. She also loves to see everyone's reaction when they see Saturn in the telescope. "It really is mind-blowing when they see the rings and realize they are actually seeing with their own eyes something they had only previously seen in pictures."

Bonus: for a nominal fee, you can rent one of Keji's popular Dark Sky kits at the Visitor's Centre. The kit includes binoculars, a star finder, a red light, and the monthly observations for the sky.

Aside from weekly dark skies programming, two extra-special events are taking place at Keji this year: from August 11-13 is the eighth edition of its annual Dark Sky Weekend and September 22-24 is



Top: Campers enjoy the Sky Circle at Kejimikujik.

Above: Night Hike at Kejimikujik with Parks Canada Interpreter, Paul Lalonde.



Left: The Swan, as seen from Tim Doucette's Deep Sky Observatory in Quinan.



Tim Doucette



Tim Doucette



Brenda Tate

Far left: The moon is all its glory.
Top: Tim Doucette, part of the Eat, Drink—
Look Up! program.
Below: The Galactic Core in summer.

“Fall for the Stars” Dark Sky Weekend—both in partnership with the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada (RASC).

The RASC has centres in New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Each centre hosts outings including “star parties” where guests are welcome. And, not to be outshined by Keji, New Brunswick’s Kouchibouguac and Fundy National Parks are also Dark Sky Preserves, with similar programs!

Walk on the wild side

As dusk settles every Tuesday night from late June to early September, you can sign up for a Stella Night Hike with Paul Lalonde in Church Point. I’ve done it when the Milky Way and some shooting stars over Baie Sainte-Marie put on a show to rival a fireworks display. I’ve also taken this night hike with Paul on a drab grey night and still found the experience rated 10 out of 10. Why, you might ask?

Paul explains, “A night hike gives us

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insights into what it means to be human; it gives us a different view. That's why I like doing night hikes, helping people observe how their senses are working differently. There are simple shifts in perspectives."

Within seconds, the dark wrapped its arms around us like an old friend and our eyes started to adjust. Snaking along one of the paths through Le Petit Bois behind our starting point at Église Sainte-Marie, I could recognize shapes and forms.

At one point we stopped and became very still. Strange sounds (a cross between a quack and a screech) turned out to be mating porcupines. Paul explained that hearing improves in the absence of light, adding, "Sitting alone in the forest at night, hearing the rustling of leaves or unknown animals connects us to our observer mind. It also connects us to a really ancient and primitive part of ourselves; we can tune into our intuition and instinct."

Special designation; special programs

This area is part of the Acadian Skies & Mi'kmaq Lands—North America's first Starlight Destination designated by the Starlight Foundation. It includes the municipalities of Argyle, Clare and Yarmouth. Programs like the Stella

Night Walk, a Dark Skies Festival and a new experience called Eat, Drink—Look Up! (a combination of the Yarmouth Foodie Tour, a sumptuous dinner at the Hatfield House in Tusket and a stargazing experience with Tim Doucette at his Deep Sky Observatory in Quinan) are all on tap.

Tim Doucette is over-the-moon excited about his upcoming season. Aside from being part of the Eat, Drink—Look Up! program, he's open for business every night of the week where guests receive an introduction to astronomy, learn how to use the high powered telescope in his observatory, then step outside onto a large deck replete with recliner chairs and binoculars, and follow Tim as he gives a guided sky tour.

Meeting Tim is inspirational. Surprisingly, he only has 10 percent vision and is legally blind. However, after some surgery when he was 16, his eyes became permanently dilated. This means that at night, he can see more than anyone. He's currently in the process of getting his telescope automated which means people will be able to tune into he's seeing from remote locations. There are only two other such set-ups in the world.

With offerings like this, it's easy to see why people are putting stargazing in Atlantic Canada high on their bucket list.

Star light, star bright, how best to capture the stars tonight?

You'll need a tripod and a Single Lens Reflex (SLR) camera with a wide-angle lens—the wider the better.

1. To reduce vibration, set the camera to a short time-delay.
2. If you have a live-view mode, use that to focus.
3. Find a wide-open space to view the stars where there is little or no light pollution. Beaches and marshes are excellent. Some highways offer spectacular, unimpaired views on either side.
4. Read books and magazines on the subjects of astronomy and astrophotography; talk to people already involved in the hobby; check out Facebook groups dedicated to astrophotography.
5. Check out these cool sites:
 - Stellarium. stellarium.org/en_CA (install a planetarium on your desktop.)
 - Lonely Speck lonelyspeck.com (gear, tips and tutorials)
 - Sky News skynews.ca (Canada's astronomy magazine and website.)

Warning: Stargazing and nighttime photography can be addictive. 📷

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