

# The lure of the night, putting the awe in photography

Jan 29, 2017 11:56 AM by: Sandra Phinney



1 / 6 Boardwalk in Wedgeport on the trail next to the Tuna Museum. (YARMOUTH & ACADIAN SHORES)

It's 7:15 p.m. and approaching dusk on a balmy September evening.

I'm with my husband in one of the new [yurts](#) at Université Sainte-Anne in Church Point.

Five friends have joined us for an overnight getaway and we've all signed up for the Stella Night Hike, hoping to spend time gawking at the Milky Way and dazzling constellations over Baie Sainte-Marie. Alas, it's a drab grey night and there won't be a star in sight.

Just before darkness drops, we hike across campus and meet with our guide, Paul Lalonde, in front of Église Sainte-Marie — the tallest wooden church in North America.

I half expect the tour to be cancelled. Instead, after a round of introductions, we set off into [Le Petit Bois](#), directly behind the church. Little did I know this starless stroll would be the highlight of my summer.

Lalonde is a longtime lover of the night. He's a Parks Canada interpreter and on Tuesdays (his day off) he slips down to Church Point where he leads [Stella Night Hikes](#).

"A night hike gives us 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," he says.

I quickly realize that, for starters, we tend to use flashlights to ward off the dark, as if it were the enemy. We agree to leave our headlamps and flashlights behind, although Lalonde gives us each a mini-light that will beam red if needed.



*Sandyland  
Ponds in Port  
Maitland.  
(BILL  
CURRY)*

Le Petit Bois was created years ago by the Eudist priests who founded the university. Over the years, the [paths](#) multiplied, and spread

behind the church and campus.

Today, it's a maze of coastal and wooded trails that are stunning in their diversity. It's not uncommon to wind your way through a pristine Acadian forest only to find a gazebo on the shoreline or a meandering boardwalk over a boggy marsh. I've had the pleasure of exploring these trails during the day. Tonight would be different.

Within seconds, the dark wrapped its arms around us like an old friend and our eyes started to adjust to the surroundings. As we snaked along one of the paths, we could recognize shapes and forms.

During the tour, Lalonde gave us insights about forest life at night, and why red lights are better than white lights. We discussed the effects of light pollution, our own relationship between light and dark — and more.

At one point we stopped, became very still, and listened. I was surprised how acute my hearing was. Lalonde 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."

Then we heard what sounded like a cross between a quack and a screech. "Duck?" "Owl?" "Crow?" When Lalonde said it was porcupine mating, I had to smile. I've lived for years in porcupine country and had never heard them make a sound.

By the time we came back to the church two hours later, I agreed with Lalonde that night hiking gives people a better appreciation of our world. For sure, it's a break from the conventionality of our daily lives.

Mind you, some nights, the skies strut their stuff and put on shows that can trigger enthusiastic oohs and ahhs. It's always a bonus.

### Star light, star bright



*Bill Curry loves to photograph the Milky Way. Here are six images of the Milky Way, shot rotating the camera 15 degrees each time, then*

*stitched together in Photoshop. (BILL CURRY)*

Retired educator Bill Curry says that he was introduced to the wonders of the night skies at the age of eight when his father bought a kit from Edmund's Scientific and they constructed a small Newtonian telescope. He says, "To this day I remember the first night we looked through that telescope and we saw the rings of Saturn. I was hooked!"

Curry has photographed the night sky off and on since his youth. "But the motivation to do more came when the Yarmouth/Clare/Argyle area was being considered for (and eventually became) the [Acadian Skies & Mi'kmaq Lands: Starlight Reserve & Destination](#) — the first UNESCO-certified Starlight Tourist Destination in North America."

The award-winning photographer met with an astronomer and other representatives who were going to make the case. "They said the area looked promising, but they could really use some good photos. So in 2013, I began to shoot serious night-time images."

That inspired [Curry](#) to create a solo show, which he eventually mounted in both Annapolis Royal and Yarmouth, and to offer nighttime photography courses at his studio in Port Maitland.

Curry says that although astrophotography can get expensive when you get into things like guided camera mounts and CCD capture devices, you can keep it simple.

"Since I'm more interested in the Milky Way and night scenes rather than individual objects, I use my normal camera and a tripod, and can take 20-second images without star trailing by using a wide lens — like a 14 mm wide-angle lens."

Although point-and-shoot cameras are not very effective, Curry says that digital SLR cameras work just fine. You don't need an expensive camera — just a wide lens!

### Tips from an amateur who shoots like a pro

Brenda Levy Tate can often be found prowling the backroads of Yarmouth County in the wee hours of the morning. Tate is a hobby photographer, poet, and retired high school teacher living in Tusket Falls.



*Air glow  
from the Title  
Road in  
Wedgeport,  
technically*

*called chemoluminescence. (BRENDA TATE)*

Mainly self-taught, Tate says, "I had been seeing some astonishing photos posted in the Astrophotography Nova Scotia group on Facebook and finally took the bait. My interest in astronomy

goes back many years, as my father used to identify the constellations and some of the major stars for me. He'd been in the navy and knew the night sky very well."

Tate calls herself a low-budget photographer. She has a Canon 7D and an assortment of lenses that will open up to a wide F-stop.

"They're wide-angle because longer lenses show star trails, even with very brief exposures. I have a sturdy tripod and I set the camera to a short time delay, so the shutter opens when I'm not touching it, to reduce vibration. Sometimes I use a flashlight to illuminate part of the landscape."

One trick she's learned is how to use Live View mode for focusing the lenses. "My stars were little blobs until I mastered that aspect."

She advises beginners to read books and magazines on the subjects of astronomy and astrophotography, to talk to people already involved in the hobby, and to check out the [Facebook group dedicated to astrophotography](#) as the Nova Scotia group has members all over the world and it's a good way to find mentors.

She also recommends these online sites:

- [Stellarium](#) (A planetarium on your desktop.)
- [Lonely Speck](#) (Milky Way astrophotography, gear, tutorials, etc. )
- [Sky News](#) (Canada's astronomy magazine and website.)

### **Spotlight on Yarmouth and surrounding regions**

Curry and Tate both live in Yarmouth County, a place that's rising to stardom (no pun intended) when it comes to Dark Skies. In fact, dear reader, you are among the FIRST to see the official launch of a short video presented by Yarmouth & Acadian Shores that captures what it's all about.

## Yarmouth & Acadian Shores - Dark Skies



Looking for the best place to view the stars in the Yarmouth area? Head to Port Maitland Beach, the boardwalk next to the Wedgeport Tuna Museum, the Tusket Islands, or [Birchdale](#).

You can also sign up for the Eat, Drink, and Look Up! experience, which includes not only [Yarmouth's Foodie Walking Tour](#), but also dinner at the [Hatfield House](#) in Tusket, and a special program at Tim Doucette's new [Deep Sky Eye Observatory](#) in Quinan.

Of course, another way to get hooked on Dark Skies is to go camping at [Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site](#), fondly referred to as "Keji."

Designated as a Dark Sky Preserve, Keji is situated in the UNESCO [Southwest Nova Biosphere Reserve](#) — the second largest in Canada.

Keji offers scads of night activities from taking part in a Sky Circle where there's an on-site telescope, to enjoying Outdoor Amphitheatre gatherings that include music and stories.

For \$5 you can rent a Night Sky Kit, which includes binoculars, star finder, red light, kids' games, and stargazing references. It's a sweet deal.

How about a walk on the wild side? There's nothing like taking a wee paddle when the stars are out. The night-sky perspective from a canoe or kayak is wickedly wonderful.

Finally, remember Paul Lalonde? When he's not leading the Stella Night Hikes in Church Point (on Tuesdays), you'll likely find him at Keji leading night hikes and campfire programs. Tell him that an admirer says hello and that she now hears the porcupines mating at night in Canaan.

## Comments

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**Ivan Ray Blades** · YCMHS

Great story and beautiful description of the wonders of the night skies here in Nova Scotia

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**Sandra Phinney** · Works at Freelance Writer and Photographer

Thanks for popping into view Ivan! Imagine you see tons of stars where you live!

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**Trudy Amirault** · Acadia University

Bravo, Sandra! You have captured the uniqueness of southwestern Nova Scotia! Beautiful skies and talented, generous people.

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**Sandra Phinney** · Works at Freelance Writer and Photographer

Yes, there are so many talented and generous folks in this part of the world. And a special place to live to boot! Thanks Trudy Amirault. Lucky are we.

Like · Reply · Jan 29, 2017 8:27pm



**David Gorman** · Centre of Geographic Sciences

Great article Sandra

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**Sandra Phinney** · Works at Freelance Writer and Photographer

Thanks David Gorman. And happy to know that Chris Green (photographer photo 6/6 is your uncle. Small world, eh?

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**Rose-Marie Lohnes** · Mount Saint Vincent University

Wonderful stories and photos (and references) and so pleased to have Brenda Levy Tate featured- one of my favorite writers, photographers, people.

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**Sandra Phinney** · Works at Freelance Writer and Photographer

I sooo appreciate her involvement in this story. Lots of great tips for us!

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**Rich Fitzgerald** · Stettler, Alberta

crazy... I grew up 20 minutes away from St. Anne's and never knew of the P'tit Bois. Love the story and the pictures, really made me miss home for sure!

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