



Courtesy photo by MIKKO LAGERSTEDT

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Embracing the Night

Dark Sky – and Celestial Christmas!

“If people looked at the stars each night, they’d live a lot differently. When you look into infinity, you realize that there are more important things than what people do all day.” – Bill Watterson

Today – at exactly 11:28 a.m. – is the miracle of Winter Solstice – Dec. 21, the longest night of the year, marking the official beginning of winter in the northern hemisphere. At this moment, the tilt of the Earth’s axis is least aligned with the sun, causing the shortest day of the year. Normally, about this time of year, I find myself driving to a hilltop in late afternoon to chase that last bit of winter light before darkness seeps in. But today, this week, this year, I am reversing that trend. Instead of chasing the light, I am embracing the night.

The catalyst for this change occurred over Thanksgiving weekend when I heard over the radio that the International Dark-Sky



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Association would have its annual meeting in Boston – for two reasons. First, because Boston is a “Bright Lights” city, one of the most light-polluted cities in the country, and, two, because some of IDA’s most active chapters are in New England. I knew nothing of IDA until that moment, much less that Boston was so “bright.”

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In January 2016, IDA announced the designation of the Cosmic Campground in western New Mexico as an International Dark Sky Sanctuary – the first such designation in the United States. International Dark Sky Sanctuaries are public and private lands possessing an exceptional quality of starry nights. The Cosmic Campground is a 3.5 acre site in the Gila National Forest, an exceptionally dark part of the country, featuring a basic infrastructure to support campers, offering a 360-degree, unobstructed view of the night sky.

In April 2017, IDA announced its first International Dark Sky Place – land that spans the border between the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, Alberta, Canada, and Glacier National Park in Montana. Last September, the Galloway Forest

Dark Sky Park in Scotland hosted the first European Dark Skies Conference. Keith Muir, Forest Enterprise Scotland’s visitor services manager, said, “This is really good news for putting the south west of Scotland on the map as an international stargazing destination.” John Barentine of the IDA said, “It is especially fitting that the event will be held near Galloway Forest, where it can be said the movement scored its first major victory for dark skies preservation in Europe.”

A bit closer to home – from New Mexico and Scotland – is “Bright Lights” Boston. A study published last year in the scientific journal *Science Advances* announced the Milky Way is not visible for many residents living along the eastern seaboard – in Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D.C.