

DARK SKY COUNTRY

by E. Dan Klepper

WRITING ABOUT the Big Bend region of west Texas is a tough job, especially when trying to come up with new and creative ways to describe its natural beauty. Plenty has already been written about its dramatic landscapes, paragraphs that employ the usual suspects like “stunning”, “vast” and “breathtaking”. The same can be said of its plants and animals, a botanical and zoological compendium of species, including several found only here and nowhere else on the planet. Subjects like the Big Bend sunsets, thunderstorms, snowfall and rainbows along with the decorative words that describe them have all found their

way into articles, books, blogs and websites from Texas to Timbuktu. But one description seems to endure. A simple refrain that never really changes. As night falls in the Big Bend, visitors turn their gaze skyward and repeat this meme-worthy phrase from the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*: “Oh my God, it’s full of stars”.

The Big Bend region offers some of the darkest skies in the country, granting sky watchers remarkably clear views into our deepest space. To help locate your own personal stargate in the Big Bend, follow some tips below and find out how Big Bend communities are keeping the lights low and the stars shining bright.

BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

IT DOESN'T GET any darker than in Big Bend National Park. When the park achieved national park status in 1944, a dark sky wasn't considered a top-shelf resource. But over time, the opportunity to view stars unimpeded by artificial light diminished across the nation, the awareness of light pollution evolved and the value of a dark sky grew into a key feature for places like the Big Bend. Today, the national park considers their dark sky a primary asset.

Once the National Park Service recognized the night sky as a critical resource it made changes to park lighting across the country to enhance and protect this integral part of the visitor experience. In Big Bend, the national park has undertaken lighting studies to gauge long-term changes in their night skies and incorporated lighting strategies to decrease the light signature of existing infrastructure. The park's efforts culminated in achieving "Gold Tier International Dark Sky Park" status courtesy of the International Dark-Sky Association, an organization with a mission to help preserve and protect dark skies worldwide.

"Big Bend National Park is noted for having the darkest measured night skies of any national park in the lower 48 states," explains Tom VandenBerg, Big Bend's Chief of Interpretation & Visitor Services. "We've been presenting night sky programming since 2010 and will continue to work to keep our skies dark so that visitors will have a night sky that they will always remember."

Currently the national park offers two regularly scheduled interpretive programs about their night skies. "A Park Ranger's Guide to the Galaxy" is an orientation for beginning stargazers, a sensible introduction for kids and novices who wish to explore the universe overhead. For visitors who would like to be more proactive, "Some Endangered Evening" offers visitors a park perspective on the negative impact of artificial lighting and how individuals can help to keep their own skies dark.

"This year we plan to expand our programming to include full moon hikes, night time astronomy programs, and perhaps weekly telescope viewings," says VandenBerg. "We'll have Big Bend's first astronomy volunteer arriving in October to help get these programs up and running for our busy season. Big Bend will also be in the path of a lunar eclipse on January 21, 2019 and we hope to have a large event to celebrate. In addition, we're highlighting the value of dark skies, and identifying the year's major celestial events in a special article in this year's park visitor newspaper."

BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK

JUST UP THE road from the national park you'll

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**- BRAD NEWTON,
DIRECTOR OF THE
PRESIDIO MUNICIPAL
DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT**



STAR PARTY IN BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK

find Big Bend Ranch State Park, another 350,000-plus acres of protected Chihuahuan Desert wildlands. Like the national park, Big Bend Ranch State Park has also achieved Dark Sky Park designation. An overnight on one of several backpacking trails will validate the achievement, providing astounding views of the night sky. The park interior, located among the peaks and canyons of the Bofecillos Mountains, is shielded from much of the regional light pollution leaking over the horizon from the border town of Presidio and its sister city Ojinaga in Mexico. For the less adventurous, a stop along any of the day-use and overnight campgrounds easily accessed by car from FM 170 (the paved, rural route running beside the Rio Grande River) will also provide great star gazing opportunities.

"We promote dark skies mostly through outreach and education programs and have partnerships with organizations such as the McDonald Observatory and the Big Bend Conservation Alliance," explains Amber Harrison, Interpreter/Park Ranger for Big Bend Ranch. The park just completed a busy year and Harrison is hoping to repeat some of the popular programs that help celebrate their Dark Sky Park status.

"In April we had guest speakers from the McDonald Observatory and Big Bend Conservation Alliance and hosted a star party. In May we partnered with the Texas Chapter of the International Dark-Sky Association and hosted another star party here at the park. Later in May we worked with Big Bend Conservation Alliance and put on a dark-sky friendly outdoor lighting workshop. In June we hosted an astrophotography workshop at the Barton Warnock Visitor Center that was taught by a professional photog-

rapher who has been working in the Big Bend." Harrison recommends periodically checking the park's events calendar online for any upcoming programs like these.

The park also participates in monitoring the progress of dark skies protection and preservation. "As part of the designation, we are required to monitor the quality of the night sky over time," Harrison explains. "In an effort to do this we have developed a volunteer opportunity called the Dark-Sky Stewards program where we solicit members of the public with a background in astronomy or astrophotography to take observations or photos of the night sky and submit them to the park. The observations will be included in our annual report to the International Dark-Sky Association."

DARK SKY DESIGNATION

SO WHAT EXACTLY does it take to attain "Dark Sky" status? Amber Harrison describes the application process she went through for the state park: "We had to conduct a lighting inventory for every facility in the park, take a sky quality survey, develop a lighting management plan and conduct public programs. I'd say that learning about the technical aspects of lighting and developing the inventory and a lightscape management plan was one of the more challenging and interesting parts of the application for me."

ELSEWHERE AROUND THE REGION

You don't have to venture far into the outback to enjoy dark skies. Most of the Big Bend communities from Marathon to El Paso are bringing the importance of protecting and conserving our dwindling dark-sky resource to the forefront.

MARATHON

Home to the historic Gage Hotel (who modified all their lighting to accommodate sky watching) Marathon promotes astronomy from their own back yard. The Marathon Sky Park, located at the Marathon Motel on the edge of town, offers con-

crete telescope pad rentals (including 110 electricity outlets, Wi-Fi and a shade cloth to help block light intrusion), telescope rentals and even a small roll-off roof observatory for enthusiasts with their own equipment.

Balancing a little astral-business with a lot of astral-fun, Marathon hosts the annual New Moon Festival featuring live music, food, rocket launches, a weather balloon launch, night sky viewing with telescopes at the Marathon Sky Park and a fundraiser to maintain the Marathon school district's own telescope.

"When people visit from the big city," says Marathon Chamber of Commerce president Alaine Berg, "they look up at the sky and are amazed. I've heard many visitors say 'I didn't know I could ever see this many stars in the sky.'" Berg, co-owner of Eve's Garden Bed & Breakfast, encourages visitors to enjoy the Garden's own stargazing deck, an elevated platform shaped like a sunflower.

MARFA

MARFA, THE RANCHING and art-driven community besieged by mystery lights, offers its own unique blend of stargazing and fine art.

"The Judd Foundation, with the support of our promotional organization Visit Marfa, opens artist Donald Judd's home and studios in downtown Marfa each May for a star party for the community," explains Andrea Walsh, Director of Communications for the Foundation. The annual event takes place over Memorial Day Weekend, usually on a Sunday evening. Free and open to the public, the community is invited to tour the art studios before an evening of star gazing with the Big Bend Astronomers club. Guests are encouraged to bring blankets, flash lights, picnics, binoculars and telescopes. "We welcome about 300 guests each year," says Walsh.

Just nine miles east of town on Highway 90, Marfa's Mystery Lights Viewing Area is a great spot to view the stars while waiting to catch a glimpse of the oft-seen mystery lights. The viewing area features modified lighting to better view the night skies as well as any anomalies that might arise from the desert darkness.

FORT DAVIS AND MCDONALD OBSERVATORY

A VISIT TO the dark skies of west Texas would not be complete without a personal hajj to the state's own mecca of stargates — Fort Davis and the McDonald Observatory. The observatory's weekly star parties are well-known throughout Texas for their fun and informative atmosphere. But many people don't realize that the observatory is also a laboratory where research into deep space (as well as our closest star, the sun) happens year-round. The observatory (which is officially part of the University of Texas campus) takes outreach seriously, helping communities and individuals to understand the importance of preserving our dark skies and how each of us can help, sometimes simply by modifying our own existing

outdoor lighting.

Nearby Davis Mountains State Park is also a good place to cast a gaze (or aim a telescope or binoculars) skyward. Thanks to nearby Fort Davis' efforts to reduce light pollution, the state park enjoys nighttime viewing options. Or try one of the Nature Conservancy's Open Weekends at their Davis Mountains Preserve where the mountain range's highest peak, Mt. Livermore, is surrounded by a dazzling array of stars once the sun sets. Check the conservancy's website for details.

OTHER STATE PARKS

TEXAS PARKS AND Wildlife offers a number of places to explore the galaxy, both deep within the



Big Bend and along its periphery.

"Our Devils River State Natural Area has begun the process of trying to obtain Dark-Sky Park designation," says TPWD Regional Director Mark Lockwood. "It's a rigorous process but Devils River (near Comstock and Del Rio) clearly meets the basic criteria. Otherwise, we're working on dark-sky friendly lighting at our parks as well as promoting dark skies through interpretive tours. Over the past five years TPWD has partnered with McDonald Observatory to provide instructions to park interpreters and other staff across the state on dark sky interpretation."

GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS

FAR NORTH OF the Davis Mountains, along the Texas/New Mexico border, Guadalupe Mountains National Park has been making headway to keep up with their southern sister park with outreach, education and working towards Dark Sky designation. The park conducts star parties along their western flank, near Dell City, and works with an astronomy club out of El Paso for more formal programming. Check the park's website for upcoming events.

EL PASO

SOME COMMUNITIES across the Big Bend may not be as lucky as other locations where enjoying a dark sky comes naturally. Despite their artificially-lit night skies, places like the heavily-populated El Paso continue to promote and support dark-sky initiatives.

"Franklin Mountains State Park in El Paso is not a dark sky park and likely never will be," explains park interpreter Lydia Pagel. "Although

the park itself has no artificial lighting whatsoever, the sky glow from the city of El Paso and its border city Juarez is way too strong for us to be a dark sky location. Despite this, we offer night sky viewing opportunities for El Pasoans by promoting astronomy programs with the help of Sun City Astronomers, organizing full moon hikes, and talking with visitors about the impacts of light pollution as well as the cultural importance of the night sky and constellations.”

PRESIDIO AND BEYOND

BACK IN THE heart of the Big Bend, the border community of Presidio (also plagued by light pollution but no less enthusiastic about protecting the night skies) has made major headway in bringing awareness about the importance of preserving Big Bend’s dark nights.

“Presidio promotes and reviews dark-sky lighting plans on all new construction in town,” says Brad Newton, Executive Director of the Presidio Municipal Development District. “As older fixtures fail in the city we are working with the power company to replace them with dark-sky compliant fixtures.”

In fact, despite the challenges in creating a dark sky habitat, Newton makes the best case for preserving our night skies throughout the Big Bend. “The preservation of our rural dark skies is the key to our tourism efforts,” he says. “It’s the best show in the Big Bend and the price of admission is still free.”

IN MEMORIAM



Ron Sanders

THE TEXAS MOUNTAIN TRAIL would like to recognize a pioneer in the Texas tourism industry and a driving force in the Big Bend & Texas Mountains Travel Guide. Rondell Gene “Ron” Sanders passed away in June 2018 after a long battle with a variety of health issues. Ron, who never met a stranger, was instrumental in creating the Brewster County Tourism Council and in promoting Big Bend National Park to international audiences as a unique and intriguing Texas destination. He also began the Big Bend Snapshot Roadside Exhibit program, which highlights the history of Brewster County and has been recognized for its importance in preserving the history of the state’s largest county for generations to come.

Ron began his tourism career more than 50 years ago at Big Bend National Park, working his way up from housekeeping to general manager before being named a special projects director for Forever Resorts. He served on numerous boards across the state, including the Texas Hotel & Lodging Association and the Texas Historical Commission.

Ron’s contributions to the tourism industry in Texas are too numerous to mention here. His creativity, no-nonsense approach to business and booming “Big as Texas” voice will remain with us in our memories. He’ll be missed by all of us at the Texas Mountain Trail and by his numerous colleagues across the state.

Rest in peace, Ron.

Robert Alvarez
Executive Director, Visit Big Bend

Discover the adventure of the true frontier...
it awaits you in Far West Texas!

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part of the Texas Heritage Trails
so much more than just blue signs on the highway!

COURTESY DJ SANDERS