

# Stargazing Summits of Michigan

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LIFESTYLE | Stargazing Summits of Michigan

To gaze into the night sky is to reflect on our place in this universe. When looking at the thousands of stars speckled across the void of space, we realize how far we've come and what's important in our lives. Michiganders who desire a vivid view of the constellations don't need to travel to the mountains of Sweden or the deserts of Arizona. Beautiful dark skies can be found right here in Michigan. Pack up your camping gear and turn off your phones as you prepare to marvel at the beauty of the cosmos.

## **DARK SKY PARKS**

There are three official Michigan dark sky parks registered with the International Dark Sky Association. These parks must meet high standards when it comes to light pollution. Michigan's first dark sky designation was the Headlands International Dark Sky Park in Mackinaw City, according to park manager Jamie Westfall. A county-owned plot of land attracted crowds with its events held by star lore historian Mary Stewart Adams. "Soon the idea grew into designating the area as a dark sky park. It was just the sixth dark sky park in the country and ninth in the world," Westfall explains.

The Dr. T.K. Lawless Park in Jones and the Keweenaw Dark Sky Park in Copper Harbor have since been added to Michigan's





HEADLANDS INTERNATIONAL DARK SKY PARK

growing collection of certified dark sky parks. The parks host weekly events with on-site astronomy enthusiasts to educate kids and adults about all things space related. Telescopes are set up for viewers to enjoy, though they aren't needed for an exceptional stargazing experience. The best time to go stargazing at any location is on a clear night during a new moon, so the moonlight doesn't distract from the stars.

### THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

Few people outside of the state know that the northern lights — also called the aurora borealis — are visible in Michigan. The colorful spectacle is caused by charged solar particles colliding with gases in the earth's atmosphere following explosions on the sun. Visibility can be hard to predict, with only a few days of notice. The Keweenaw Peninsula, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Leelanau State Park, Drummond Island and Whitefish Point are among the most beloved viewing spots for the northern lights in Michigan. In general, the further north, the more vibrant they will appear. Find a place with a north-facing vantage over the water, and check apps such as SpaceWeatherLive or the space weather website for "Kp levels," which indicate the brightness of the lights.


### ISLAND SKIES

If you have a boat or ferry access, what better place to get a remote viewing of the stars than an island? Plenty of small islands dot the map between Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsula, and these islands are typically low in light pollution because they have few buildings. North Manitou and South Manitou Island are serene, desolate stargazing locations off the coast of Glen Arbor.

The Les Cheneaux chain of islands near Cedarville has stargazing campouts in addition to kayaking excursions. Near Charlevoix, Beaver Island offers pristine views of twinkling stars and planets for those who take the ferry. Its nearby neighbors, Garden Island, Hog Island and High Island, can be reached by private boat or kayak, for experienced paddlers.

### WHAT TO BRING

Since areas up north can get chilly at night, especially by the lakeshore, stargazers would be wise to bring a blanket or warm jacket. Westfall recommends bringing a red-light flashlight. Regular flashlights cause light pollution and distract from the experience, so dark sky parks don't allow them. Lawn chairs are a cozy option for those who don't want to sit on the ground, and many individuals and families bring along coolers with snacks and drinks. Rules about pets vary at different nature spots throughout Michigan, but the dark sky parks often welcome animal companions. Viewers can bring binoculars to their designated stargazing spot if they'd like an enhanced perspective.

Stargazing is the perfect way to reconnect with nature this season, so start marking free days on your calendar. Shooting stars, mesmerizing swirls of the aurora borealis and crystal-clear constellations may be in your future. 



HEADLANDS INTERNATIONAL DARK SKY PARK