

Shining a light on Nevada's dark skies



Great Basin National Park during the 2015 Astronomy Festival. Photo/Ryan Berendsen

By Tony Berendsen

I've often said Nevada has two great resources – rocks and stars. Anyone who has worked land in Nevada can attest to the abundance of rocks, and anyone that has strayed away from the meager city lights of most of Nevada has seen a multitude of stars in its night sky.

There is a great history of mining the rocks of our state. It's part of our culture and heritage. Nevada was built on the wealth of the ore rocks held for those who sought them. And

all the time an unparalleled a wealth of stars and view into the cosmos lay above the land of Nevada receiving much less attention.

2016 heralds in a new era for our precious resource of star studded skies. Great Basin National Park has been designated a DSP (Dark Sky Park) by the IDA (International Dark-Sky Association). The designation ensures the pristine darkness of the park will be preserved for visitors of the park to enjoy, and for the health and well being of the animals calling the park home.

The IDA, founded in 1988, works to educate the public about outdoor lighting that does not obscure our view of the stars, and with public and private entities to designate areas of land as dark sky preserves. Great Basin National Park is the most recent of 34 parks (25 in the U.S.) to become a DSP.

I talked to John Barentine, program manager for the IDA, about the status and development of GBNP as a DSP.

“Great Basin started their application effort some time before my arrival at IDA in late 2013. Their case is typical, in that it was a stop-and-start effort that moved ahead when staff and/or volunteers were available to work on it, and otherwise it went dormant for different lengths of time. It’s hard for parks to sustain the application effort, given the resources involved,” he said.

What level of designation did the park receive?

“Great Basin was certified as a gold-tier Dark Sky Park, indicating the highest level of natural darkness. To put that in context against our other designation tier levels (silver and bronze) Great Basin is certainly one of the darkest parks in our system, largely by virtue of its relative geographic isolation from big cities and the screening effect of topography that tends to block distant light sources like Las Vegas,” Barentine said.

What type of astronomy or star gazing programs should visitors to the park expect?

“The park is really exemplary in this respect, putting on over 100 programs a year that are specific to astronomy and/or dark skies, including formal interpretive presentations, an annual Astronomy Festival each September, special events like full moon walks and meteor shower watch parties,” Barentine said. “In addition to maintaining an active web and social media presence, they have also reached out to towns in the region to bring the park’s night sky resource to the community. They really go above and beyond to uphold the adage that ‘half the park is after dark’ and offer visitors a significantly expanded experience that doesn’t end at sunset and start at sunrise each day.”

For more information about Nevada’s new Dark Sky Park go to the Great Basin National Park’s **website** or **International Dark-Sky Association**.

And of course, if you want to experience the DSP, take out your camping and hiking gear, binoculars, and telescope to spend a few days at the park. I guarantee you will not be disappointed.

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