

Star Guide: Ely – Gateway to the Milky Way?

By Tony Berendsen

On Aug. 25, I visited Great Basin National Park for the centennial celebration of the National Park System, the 30th anniversary of Great Basin National Park, and First Light of the Great Basin Observatory; a new research grade telescope located within the park.

Among the dignitaries speaking were Chairman Alvin S. Marques of the Ely Shoshone Tribe, Nevada Rep. Crescent Hardy, and Gov. Bryan Sandoval. Marques blessed the new observatory, saying it was a fitting addition allowing great views of the starry sky. The governor told of a recent camping trip to the park when he and his family spent the night at the Wheeler Peak campground at 10,000 feet elevation. He spoke with genuine passion of the park's many attractions, and praised the observatory as a valuable asset for Nevada.

Following the ceremony there was a First Light ribbon cutting ceremony for The Great Basin Observatory. The observatory will be used for research, outreach, and instruction in conjunction with six entities: Great Basin National Park, Great Basin National Park Foundation, UNR, Western Nevada College, Southern Utah University, and Concordia University.



Stars at Great Basin
National Park are
phenomenal. Photo/National
Park System

Will the new observatory and recent International Dark Sky Park status, coupled with many developing astronomy programs at the park put GBNP on the map as a dark sky destination? Ely, known as the gateway to the park, seems to think so, and looks forward to benefiting from an increase of dark sky tourism.

I had a chance meeting with Ely Mayor Melodi Vancamp and asked her what she thought about the potential for star gazing related tourism:

“The city could be more engaged with the park by expanding activities relating to star gazing and getting the community evolved. We are now talking about the GBNP’s importance and it’s a start, but now we have to move on this,” she declared.

“Ely is a gateway to the park, but we need to be more than a gas stop. The city has tossed around forming astronomy gatherings, starting in Ely, bringing in some businesses relating to astronomy and jump starting our dying downtown,” Vancamp said.

“By working together with the Park, providing more star gazing activities we could make tourists experience with our dark sky more memorable, and get people to stay a few extra days and see all the other sights we have to offer or plan to come back to our area.

“Several months ago, the city formed a strategic tourism committee and brought together a different and wide variety of people, we were also trying to get younger folks involved and not the same 10 people that seem to serve on every board. Peter Wallish, from GOED also has attended.”

The mayor added, "It's also amazing the amount of foreign visitors we have that come through town to go to the park. A park ranger told me he sees more people coming to see the dark sky than the cave its self."

For those of us who live in the dark sky state of Nevada a star studded view of the Milky Way is not an unusual sight to behold. But for visitors from light polluted cities across the globe a trip out to the park to view our galaxy in the night sky is a memory of a life time.

Great Basin is a beautiful park and one Nevadans hold dear to their heart. The land within the bounds of the park truly represents the natural beauty found within the vast valleys and high altitude mountain ranges of the Great Basin. But, it is the night sky above the park that may become its most popular attraction.

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