

CAPTURING THE DARK SKY

Northern Lights



PHOTOGRAPHY GUIDE

The aurora borealis (or northern lights) are one of the earth's most beautiful displays.

This natural phenomenon is caused by the interaction of solar winds with our planet's magnetic field and atmosphere. The beauty of the northern lights captures the hearts of all who experience them, and inspires artists to depict their mystical nature.

Every year, explorers, adventurers and artists from around the world travel to Cook County, Minnesota to experience the northern lights. Photographers, in particular, come to experience some of the darkest skies in the country - ranking just one on the Bortle Scale, which ranks the darkness of locations on a scale of one to nine, with nine being the brighter skies of large cities and one being the darkness that can only be found in rural areas.

Over the years, many photographers have visited Cook County. They all have their secrets on how to best capture the northern lights, but some things remain consistent across the board. Here are some of the top tips we've gathered from the pros.



EQUIPMENT CHECK

Here's what we recommend you pack for your optimal photography trip north:

CAMERA WITH MANUAL MODE - you need to be able to adjust your aperture, ISO and exposure time by hand.

WIDE-ANGLE LENS - you'll be shooting some of the darkest skies in the country. A wide-angle lens will allow your camera to pick up more light (creating more dramatic photos).

CAMERA TIMER AND TRIPOD - while not essential, these items are definitely helpful. Longer exposure times allow you to capture the celestial movements of the elusive aurora borealis, and a tripod will help you stabilize for clearer images.

SMARTPHONES - Bring your phone, but don't count on it as your primary camera. Smartphone cameras have the capacity to take amazing photos - but they're not up to the task of capturing the alluring night sky. However - they can be very useful for navigation and aurora forecasting apps.

KNOW WHERE TO GO

Like fishermen, photographers have been known to keep their favorite spots secret. At Visit Cook County, we're not opposed to sharing the wonderful places we've discovered with our visitors. We know that many come to Cook County wondering how to see the northern lights, and we're here to help. Take a look at our [top northern lights viewing routes](#) and plan your photography adventure today.

Please note many of these routes are located on country roads. Not all roadways are accessible year-round, or are maintained regularly. Your safety is important to us, but use at your own discretion. Proceed with caution during winter months and observe all road signs or closures. We recommend driving your route during the day, so you know everything will be safe and accessible come nightfall.

STABILIZATION

Since you'll be using a longer exposure, stabilizing your camera is an essential step to your success. Bring a tripod, if you have one, or find a good, stable rock, railing or even the roof of your car. The key is to eliminate the possibility of movement, so you can capture the clearest images of the night sky.

In a pinch, [Travis Novitsky](#), a talented Cook County photographer, recommends using a bean bag. You read that right! Novitsky swears by the versatility a beanbag presents - it ensures stabilization while allowing you to position your camera just about any way you want. Imagine the possibilities.

#NOFILTER

You don't need a filter. Really. To capture the most raw and real images of the northern lights, you'll want good, clear shots. For that, we do not recommend using a filter. Of course, feel free to experiment on your own to express your personal style - but the lights will speak for themselves.

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When composing more complicated shots, it can help to find your focus point during the day.

FOCUS

A great way to begin is by focusing your lens at the “infinity” marker. This gives you a solid starting point to start taking practice shots. Snap a photo and then take a peek to see if you’re happy with the focus. If you are, bravo! If not, make adjustments and keep trying until you’re satisfied. Oftentimes, trial and error is the best method for achieving just the right focus at night.

When composing more complicated shots, it can help to find your focus point during the day. Make note of any tweaks and adjustments so you’ll be at the ready to capture during the night’s darkest hours.

MAXIMIZE LIGHT

You can accomplish some truly amazing things with the use of light in dark skies photography. By shining a strong light on the foreground, you can draw attention to specific elements. Once you focus your camera on an object in the foreground, turn the autofocus OFF so you can capture the aurora in the background, too. You’ll be amazed at the beauty and drama you’re able to capture with this technique.

LEARN FROM THE PROS

Each year, [Bryan Hansel](#) and other photographers offer several popular night sky workshops that teach participants how to capture the northern lights, the Milky Way and anything else going on in the night sky. Learn how to set your ISO, what lens to use and other tips that can help you achieve the perfect photo. Follow local photographers and check the course calendars at North House Folk School and Grand Marais Art Colony for opportunities to learn.

CAPTURE MINNESOTA’S DARKEST SKIES

With these tips, you’re ready to begin your adventure in photographing the northern lights. For more resources and additional ideas for your winter getaway to Cook County, browse VisitCookCounty.com/explore - or reach out to our team directly at info@visitcookcounty.com or 218-387-2788.