

Aurora Borealis



This is a shot of the Northern Lights in Canada. Occasionally they are visible to us here in Colorado. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia commons/Alex Slaven Photography)

We were on a several day fishing trip on the Laramie River, southwest of the small Colorado town of Glendevy. I was finally successful in getting my old man mentor of all things outdoors, Mr. Caster, to take me on a fishing trip before the entire summer wasted away. After my hinting, asking, pleading, nagging and lastly downright begging, he finally gave in and agreed to go in the mountains.

After a long day of fishing the river, followed by a supper of trout, we fell asleep in our sleeping bags by the dying coals of the fire. Somewhere the morning side of midnight, I awoke and noticed a strange and eerie glow in the northern sky. It was reddish orange with shades of green thrown in, and appeared to move through the sky like a slowly leaping flame.

I had never seen a light like that in the sky and, thinking it was a distant forest fire, I awoke the irascible Mr. Caster. "Why boy, that's not a



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

forest fire, those are the Northern Lights. They are very rare in Colorado, so you best enjoy them," he said.

The magnificent dancing lights are actually collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun that have entered the earth's atmosphere. The lights are usually seen above the northern and southern hemispheres.

In the north, the lights are called Aurora borealis, and in the south they are known as Aurora australis. The lights appear in many colors, but pale green, pink, shades of red, violet and blue are the most common.

The most common color is a yellow-green, and is produced by oxygen molecules located about 60 miles above the earth's surface. The very rare all red lights are produced by high-altitude oxygen, about 200 miles above the earth. Nitrogen produces the blues and purples we see in the lights.

Aurora borealis means "dawn of the north." In ancient Roman myths,

Aurora was the goddess of the dawn. In medieval times, the occurrences of the lights were seen as harbingers of war or famine. Certain aboriginal peoples believed that the lights were the spirits of their people.

The northern lights are common in Alaska and Canada, so much so the folks there take them for granted. For many people, seeing the lights is a bucket list item, and they will travel to the northern areas just to catch a glimpse of them.

We have had an appearance of the lights in Colorado several times over the last few years.

Folks in Denver saw them in March of 2018, and again in September of 2019. They made an appearance once during the late summer of 2019 here on the Western Slope but most of us missed the opportunity to see them.

The geomagnetic storms of the northern lights are given a rating of 1 to 5 with 1 being a minor event and 5 being extreme. In order to see the lights in Colorado it requires a 3 rating, but a 4 or 5 is best.

The key to seeing the vibrant northern lights is to find very dark skies.

You must get away from all the lights of the city. You will want a full and unobstructed view of the northern sky. I prefer a north-facing slope, positioning myself near the top.

For those of you who are serious about seeing the northern lights in Colorado, bookmark the web page of the Space Weather Prediction Center/National Oceanic And Atmospheric Administration.

This page shows a planetary K-index graph

showing the intensity of geomagnetic storms located in Boulder, Colorado. When those numbers remain high, it is time to find very dark skies.

I have been fortunate to see the northern lights several times in Colorado. First was on my trip with Mr. Caster in the mountains of Northern Colorado. The second time I saw them, I was living in Golden, Colorado, in 1974.

The most colorful and explosive light show I ever saw was at Chantrey

Inlet, a bay on the Arctic coast of Canada. I was there on a fishing trip, pursuing legendary sized lake trout and arctic char. While the fishing was fantastic, it proved secondary to the all-night long show of the northern lights.

We were fortunate to be at the Inlet when a very strong magnetic storm was taking place, and the show occurred each night of our stay.

Needless to say, I got very little sleep on that trip.

Chantrey Inlet is the home to Utkuhiksalik, a nomadic Inuit who live in

igloos in the winter and tents during the summer. The Inuit people had several beliefs for what these magical skylights represented. Some believed they were the spirits of their ancestors playing a game with a human skull.

My favorite belief in the northern lights pertains to the ancient hunting tribes of Inuit's who make the great north their home. These tribes believe that the lights are the spirits of the animals that the arctic hunters have killed for food. When I watched those lights, I could not have agreed more.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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