

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS



On Sundays, staff writer Tracy Crane shows her wildlife side. Email tips to [tcrane@news-gazette.com](mailto:tcrane@news-gazette.com).

## First Dark Sky Park in the state

After months of work, and then waiting, the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve in northeastern Champaign County has officially been certified as a Dark Sky Park — the first in Illinois — by the International Dark Sky Association.

"We could not be more grateful to the International Dark Sky Association and the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society for their work in protecting one of our greatest natural assets — the star-filled night sky," said Champaign County Forest Preserve District Executive Director Mary Ellen Wuellner after getting the good news this week that the 1,702-acre preserve has been added to a growing list of Dark Sky Parks worldwide. "Located in the darkest corner of our county, Middle Fork fit all the criteria for Dark Sky Park status. We now have the opportunity for everyone to recognize it too."

A Dark Sky Park is an area known for exceptionally high-quality stary nights and a nocturnal environment that is specifically protected for its scientific, natural, educational and cultural heritage, as well as its public enjoyment.

Achieving Dark Sky Park status is an extensive process, and this local effort involved not only district staff, but also the Citizens Advisory Committee and the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society, who all worked long hours to gather and interpret night sky data, make lighting retrofits, plan and carry out public education forums and prepare the 100-plus page application for official designation. And the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and the Community Foundation of East Central Illinois also helped by making private donations that helped the district switch out all the exterior lighting at Middle Fork to fully-shielded, Dark Sky-compliant fixtures.

"This really was a team effort," Wuellner said.

David Leake, director of the Staerckel Planetarium and CUAS member, said he was overjoyed when he first heard the news.

"The forest preserve staff and their Citizens Advisory Committee put a lot of work into this project, and it paid off," said Leake, who also thanked the mayors of Paxton, Rantoul, Urbana and



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Parkland College instructor David Leake, left, worked with Lisa Sprinkle, marketing director at the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, and Matt Kuntz, superintendent at the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve near Penfield, to certify Middle Fork as the first Dark Sky Park in Illinois. The park has made a variety of changes, including installation of new light poles (in background) that point light downward.

Champaign and VisitChampaignCounty for their support of the project. "Champaign County will now be on the map as far as dark skies go and sky watchers from Chicago, St. Louis, Indianapolis and all parts in-between will visit to enjoy the Milky Way and our beautiful prairie sky."

In recognition of its new status, Middle Fork River Forest Preserve will celebrate with the public during next year's

International Dark Sky Week, March 31 through April 6, by throwing a star party. And the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society will join the District in ramping up night sky related programming at Middle Fork, while visitors who camp in the preserve's campground will continue to have nightly access to the park's dark skies. The Harry L. Swartz Campground is closed for the year, but its 65 camping sites reopen April 1.