This is definitely the year for northern lights photography

TALES FROM THE ROAD

ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

The authors moved a 1951 Fargo truck into their pasture and gave it a new lease on life as a prop for night photography, including this year's spectacular northern lights show. | ROBIN & ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

If you enjoyed the recent dazzling northern lights displays, watch for more on the horizon because 2024 may well be the best year in the past two decades.

As a result, there is no better time to grab your camera and get ready to capture one of nature's greatest spectacles.

The night of May 11, 2024, has already become legendary with brilliant sightings reported from many parts of the world, including as far south as Florida. The unusual flourish of red and purple was the strongest we have ever seen.

The northern lights, or aurora borealis, result from sunspot activity and solar eruptions that send particles that interact with the Earth's magnetic field.

While these can occur anytime, we are entering the peak of an 11-year solar cycle with optimal conditions. The last peak of the cycle in 2014 was not especially strong, according to observers, leading to the prediction that this time around could be the most active in over 20 years.

As a general rule, the farther north you are, the better the chances of seeing northern lights. However, during periods of high activity, the aurora often becomes visible a lot farther south, as we saw in early May. Choosing a location free of city light pollution certainly helps, so those living in rural areas already have a head start to being in the right place.

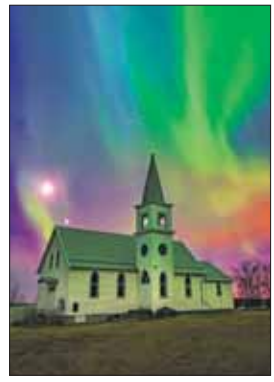
Capturing northern lights is fairly easy because exact exposure settings are not critical and most types of cameras can do the job.

While it may be possible to get reasonable results while handholding a camera, using a tripod increases the quality of images dramatically.

Use the widest lens you have and set it at the widest aperture (the smallest number, such as f/2.8). The length of the exposure could be anywhere from a second or two to 30 seconds, depending on the strength of the aurora and darkness of the sky.

If the lights are moving a lot, err on the side of a shorter exposure so that the lights don't become blurry. When the lights are more stationary, we can use a longer exposure. This in turn allows a lower ISO setting, which means less "noise," or graininess, in the image.

If you're not sure where to begin with camera settings, start with an exposure of around 15 seconds and an ISO of 1600. Check the results, then adjust the exposure and ISO up or down to get the results you like.



TOP LEFT: The northern lights were photographed over the Pleasant Point Church near Saskatoon during moonlight.

TOP RIGHT: Although the sky is the main feature when photographing northern lights, consider including some foreground interest in the image such as an old barn.

BOTTOM RIGHT: This photo was taken while looking straight up at the northern lights.

Autofocus doesn't work well, if at all, in the dark, so turn it off. Use a cable release or the self-timer on your camera so that you don't touch it and possibly introduce camera shake during the exposure. Be sure to remove any filters from your lens for aurora photography. Otherwise, weird concentric circles could show up on your images.

Although the sky is the main feature, consider including some foreground interest in the image. We like buildings such as country churches, barns or traditional grain elevators. Even treetops help to ground the photo and give it a sense of place. When near a lake, or even a large slough, move close to the water's edge to capture the aurora reflecting in the water.

Other props might be a piece of farm machinery or a vehicle placed in an appropriate spot. We dragged an old decrepit (but full of character) 1951 Fargo truck into our pasture and gave it a new lease on life as a prop for night photography.

Foreground subjects such as this will appear as silhouettes at night, but we can illuminate them by "light painting." This is simply shining a light (even a small flashlight will do) on the subject briefly, which is easy enough to do if the exposure is a few seconds long.

While we're in a favourable year, forecasting exactly when the aurora will put on a show only happens a day or two or sometimes just hours ahead. Several websites issue forecasts, but the most important one for Western Canada is Aurora Watch at aurorawatch.ca.

Run by the University of Alberta, the predictions are usually applicable for much of the Prairies. You can sign up to receive email alerts. When you're notified that conditions look promising, you can get ready to grab your gear, plan your location and photograph one of the greatest shows on Earth.

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