



Lonely Pine Tree Milky Way At Mashas Sands, 2021 KATHRYN STIVERS

# Shots in the dark

## Astrophotographers open window to nocturnal stories

**Amanda Sieradzki**  
Council on Culture & Arts

Around significant changes in the night skies, such as an eclipse or new moon, Kathryn Stivers and her small group of astrophotographers begin plotting their shots in the dark.

"If you're in a dark park along a coastline there is no light, and there are times when I can hardly see my hand in front of my face when I turn off my little flashlight," says Stivers. "The camera is much more sensitive and much more capable of gathering all that light onto a single plane, and in this case, a photographic sensor that our eye-brain connection just can't do."

Stivers' photographs are currently on display at the Artport Gallery as part of "The Dark, Starry Skies of our Ancestors: An Astrophotography" exhibition.

The gallery features work by James Daniels, an avid outdoorsman and lifelong resident of the Big Bend area, as well as scientists Kyle P. Miller and Michael Riffle. Stivers says the exhibition was a wonderful opportunity to show their interpretations of the night sky through their respective lenses.



**Stivers**



**Milky Way Oer Florida's Nature Coast, 2019**

KATHRYN STIVERS

## If you go

**What:** The Dark, Starry Skies of our Ancestors: An Astrophotography Exhibition

**When:** 8 a.m.-11:30 p.m., Sunday to Saturday through Aug. 23

**Where:** Artport Gallery, 3300 Capital Circle SW

**Cost:** Free and open to the public

**Contact:** For more information, call 850-224-2500 or visit COCA's Online Gallery

"We might be 100 feet away from each other, but we all come away with some stunningly different images," says Stivers. "One of the reasons we decided to put together this show is to focus on the aspect of the vanishing skies of our ancestors. In a lot of ways our night sky is diminishing because of light pollution and overdevelopment. Part of it is to draw focus to this whole other world out there. Just because you can't see it well doesn't mean it's not there, and it's fascinating."

## An architect's eye

Stivers picked up photography as a way to relax and commune with nature. This interest stems from childhood camping trips she'd take with her parents out west.

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# Photographs

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She describes photographing nature as the antidote to her often hectic and time-consuming profession as an award-winning architect. The camera first piqued her interest as a young adult earning her BFA at Florida State University.

There's significant crossover in her creative interests as both designer and photographer. As an architect, she works for firms that want spaces to not only meet requirements for shelter and basic human needs, but also elevate it as art in and of itself. While this process can take years to come to fruition, following the stars from behind her camera has a far more instantaneous payoff.

"Buildings can take years to see come to a conclusion," says Stivers. "A photograph is much more immediate. It's a way to hone your vision and your eye, as well as your skills of composition, light and form."

Stivers has practiced astro-landscape photography for four years. She's interested in revealing what is beyond the typical visible experience. Stivers has dabbled in both infrared images, which sees the red wavelength of the light spectrum, as well as capturing natural phenomena like The Milky Way.

## Alligators, snakes and bobcats

When readying herself for a nighttime photo session, Stivers will check the tides and study satellite imagery for clear sky predictions. She visits her chosen locations in the daytime and uses applications that will show her graphically where the stars will be positioned once nighttime falls.

The composition of the photograph is resolved often before she goes back out to take it. Stivers says an advantage of photographing along the forgotten coast means less light pollution, but the lack of surrounding civilization does sometimes create close encounters of other kinds.

"I've encountered snakes and alligators all the time," says Stivers. "I've been charged at by a wild boar and I've seen bobcats. I've seen things that go bump in the night. I've also seen with my cohorts flying objects that we've had no explanation for. There have been some head scratching moments."



Lichgate Oak Infrared Panorama, 2021 KATHRYN STIVERS

## Stories in the stars

In photographs, Stivers can tell the time of year based on the position of planets, stars and The Milky Way. A band of the universe called The Galactic Arm has a distinctive pattern, which she says some might describe as a horse with three riders on the back or a dark, black "X."

Early in the season the constellations can be seen right above the horizon line, but as the earth rotates, so do the stars.

For one of her photographs in the exhibition, "Star Trails Along Florida's Nature Coast," Stivers took several successive images one minute apart for 15 second exposures.

Then, she stacked the images to create a series of arcs representing how quickly the earth rotates relative to the galaxy which is spinning in the opposite direction. Set against the natural wonders of the Panhandle's coastal scene which remains solidly static in the center of the image, Stivers communicates larger than life themes.

"The more you get away from the cities, the more you can see the skies and you realize all the stories that you've heard from mythology and astrology were created in part because people spent half their lives in darkness," says Stivers.

"People looked to the skies and found or derived narratives from the changing movements of planets to signify different things of importance in their lives. It's always been a fascinating subject to me. I call them distant lights, everyday sights because these are all places many people have seen during the day and at

night take on this completely different character."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).



Star Trails Along Florida's Nature Coast, 2020 KATHRYN STIVERS



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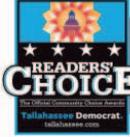
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