

2026 Festival Guide & Program Bear Creek, Oct. 2nd. and 3rd.

(This document is subject to change; subscribe to [Dark-Sky Event News](#) to stay abreast.)

LOCATION

The festival will take place off US Highway 65, a few miles south of the Buffalo National River, along Bear Creek, on approximately 1,200 acres of land owned by **Bear Creek Log Cabins**. The turn-off is on an unpaved, one-lane county road, known as the “**Dark Sky Trail**,” which will be marked with feather flags on the side of the road. Most Festival Activities take place along Bear Creek near the pavilion. A more detailed map of the Activity Area is shown further below under the Accommodations heading.



ACTIVITIES

In addition to the many activities the area offers, see [Places to Stay, Eat, and Visit](#), the **daytime programming** will include information tables, exhibits, workshops, lectures, children’s activities, and real-time telescopic solar images. Children’s activities include stomp rockets, giant bubble blowing, scale model solar system, and STEM demonstrations. See the schedule below for more details.

Boy and Girl Scouts can participate in a program that leads to an Astronomy Merit Badge and a unique ANSA Dark-Sky badge. To participate, download the Scout Program Guide document from the festival webpage. To participate, you must register for the Scout Program in addition to [registering for the festival](#), or belong to a participating scout troop that has signed up using [this link](#).



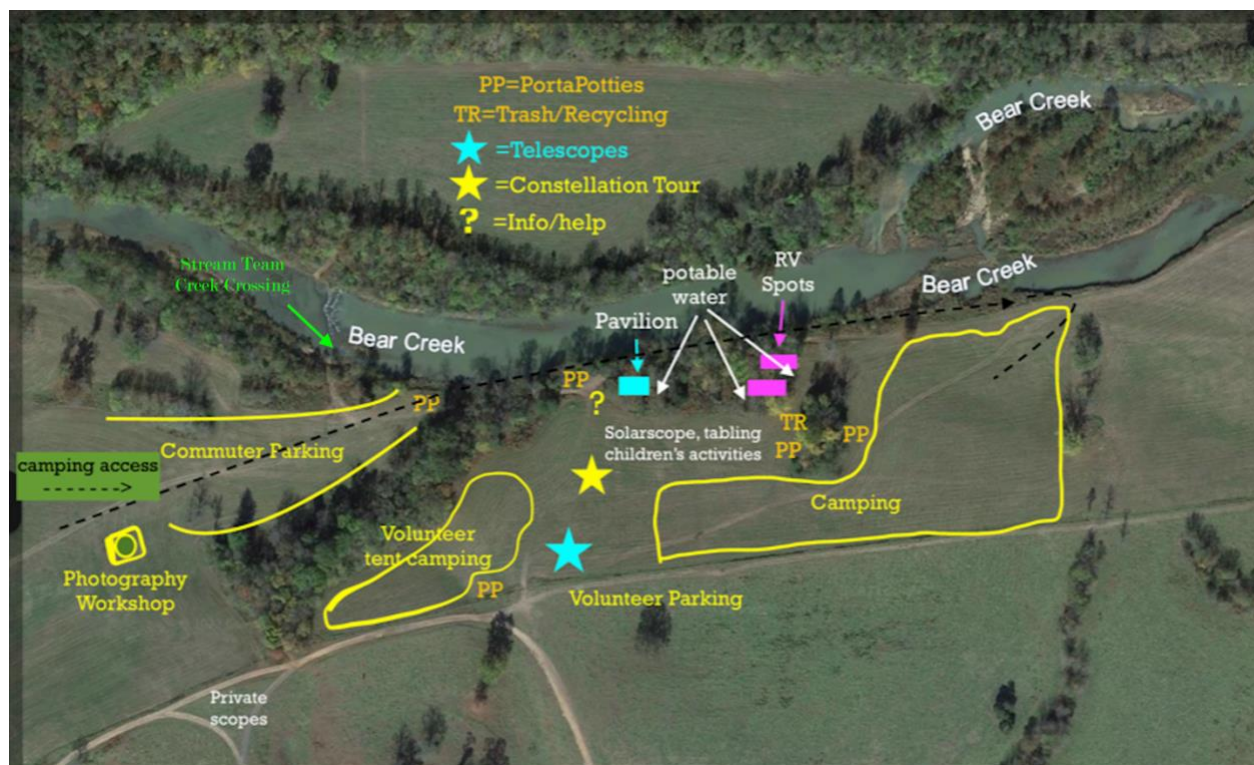
The centerpiece of the Festival is the nighttime program, which includes guided naked-eye tours of the summer Milky Way and a “**star party**” in which telescope volunteers from several states share views of the major planets, galaxies, open clusters, globular clusters, nebulae, stars that are dying, and being born. In an optional Celestial Scavenger Hunt, participants with binoculars can challenge themselves to find and observe a list of prominent celestial objects. See the guides section of the Festival webpage for links to these.

WEATHER

Any outdoor event is subject to weather impacts, and a star party requires clear skies. We schedule the event during the time of year when the night sky is most likely to be clear, maximizing our chances for one or more clear nights. It is very important not to attempt to do your own forecasting. Normal forecasts are often not granular enough to provide helpful guidance for evening cloud cover, and partly cloudy skies can clear after dark. In the event of clouds, we will have alternative educational and fun programs. The event will be canceled if conditions on site are inhospitable due to sustained heavy rain. Come, enjoy, and let us worry about the weather.

ACCOMMODATIONS – WHERE TO STAY

Bear Creek Cabins offers semi-primitive camping onsite adjacent to the festival activities in an open field area, as shown on this Activity Area Event Map. Look for signs directing which roadways to use. Campers will be able to park next to their camping site. Small campers (A-frames, pop-ups, teardrops) and tents only. Driveway lanes will be marked in the camping area. The pavilion offers potable water, electricity, and facilities for trash and recycling. Porta-potties are located at the points indicated on the map below. Please recycle what you can.



Campsites can be purchased using the links provided during the online registration process. \$35 per passenger vehicle (\$25 for event volunteers) for up to six people. \$5.00 extra for small camping trailers (teardrops, popups, A-frames). More information for campers is provided in [the online registration process](#).

Other area camping options include [Tyler Bend campground](#), only a few miles from the event; this US Park Service campground boasts flush toilets and showers. Grinder's Ferry, also a Park Service site, provides free primitive camping with vault toilet facilities.

The area has many other campgrounds, RV parks, cabins, bunkhouses, and vacation rentals. Visit the Festival webpage section on [where to stay, eat, and other things to see](#).



PREPARATION

Dress warmer than you think. People rarely spend time outdoors after dark and fail to realize how much colder it feels when the sun goes down. Consider bringing a warm beverage.

It takes twenty minutes or more to fully dark adapt your eyes. Exposure to white light will erase dark adaptation in a flash. So, **white light flashlights, cameras with flashes, and digital devices, unless used in a night vision mode (red screen), are not to be used.** Unless you want to use a sky chart or record

observations, you can do without a flashlight. But if you want one, the light must be either red or amber. These can be readily purchased online or in some larger retail outlets. Arts & craft stores typically carry a red film that you can apply to a regular flashlight. However, the easiest solution is to buy one of the little keychain flashlights in the [Festival Store](#), which comes with a neck lanyard. Purchase these when you register for pickup at the event, as we can't guarantee excess inventory at the event.

Observing on your own – Downloading and printing the current copy of the SkyMap (<https://skymaps.com/downloads.html>) is highly recommended. Binoculars are great for sky-watching (see the binocular guide download on the festival webpage). With binoculars or naked eye, use the SkyMap, Learn the Constellations Booklet, or a smartphone app (if it has a night vision feature) to do your own exploring or to participate in the celestial scavenger hunt, which can be downloaded from the Festival Website. Anyone planning to observe into the evening may benefit from a ground blanket, sleeping bag, mat, or reclining chair. If you like, you can climb to the top of the ridge where the Turney Cabin is located to observe an open horizon.

Private Telescopes - People intending to observe with a telescope should set up in the private scope area shown in the Activity Area Map, not in the star party observing area. Only scopes sharing views with the public should be in the Star Party area.

Parking – Whether camping on-site or commuting to the event from elsewhere, please plan to arrive, if possible, well before the evening activities are scheduled to begin, **but** not before the welcome desk opens each day, as indicated in the schedule below. This is especially important if you have not registered or have merchandise to pick up. Late arrivals will face a skeleton welcome crew, experience less event guidance, and have less convenient parking. **If camping on site, late arrival will prove particularly problematic as, barring an emergency, no vehicle travel will be allowed in or out of the camping area after 7:30 PM.** If you arrive early, please park out of the way and drop into the welcome desk promptly when it opens.

No pets - Animals and leashes don't go well with telescopes; no pets are allowed on the observing and camping grounds during observing hours at the event. Investigate whether there are some places to stay that welcome pets. There is an **exception for legitimate, properly trained service animals**. This exception does not apply to support animals. See notes at the end for more information.

Volunteers are needed for a variety of tasks, including assisting on the welcome and information desks, managing parking and merchandising, and set-up and breakdown. They will also be responsible for operating the A/V system. We can never have enough telescopes, and we are looking for someone to video some of the daytime presentations. Volunteers register for free and can qualify for free t-shirts and get a 20% discount on camping. The volunteer signup option can be found in the normal [registration process](#).

Food – There will be a ninety-minute break in the afternoons for dinner. In addition, ([Trailside Coffee Company??](#)) will be onsite serving brewed coffees, specialty lattes, teas, breakfast burritos, pastries, and, depending on the weather, hot chocolates & apple ciders if it's cooler; homemade ice cream and Italian sodas if it's warmer. If camping onsite, a portable cook stove is an option. Otherwise, in-town options can be found on the Festival website's section on [where to eat and stay](#).

Problems, Questions & Emergencies – The welcome desk volunteers should be able to answer most questions upon your arrival. Alternatively, check with the Responsible Lighting Table located with Stella's Outdoor Lighting Academy tent near the pavilion for help, answers, and guidance on most festival-related matters, as well as information on responsible lighting. In the event of an emergency, please contact 911.

Program Outline – The program below is subject to change, so check back close to the event and subscribe to [Dark-Sky Event News](#) to stay abreast of updates.

Friday

Non-festival Activities

The area abounds with potential activities that are not part of the festival. See the [Searcy County Activity Guide](#) for activity inspiration and the [Dining Guide for](#) meal inspiration. In addition, you might inquire about tubing at Grinder's Ferry or Shine Eye. For an eye-opening insight into how settlers lived in the Ozarks not very long ago, visit the Collier Homestead at Tyler Bend, one of the last homestead grants.

Festival Activities at Bear Creek

Afternoon Program:

3:45 – Welcome.

4:00 – 5:30 Tabling and activities:

- Observing the Night Sky (CAAS).
 - Using small telescopes and binoculars for sky-watching
 - How to participate in the festival's celestial scavenger hunt
- Connect the Constellations (NCAMN)
 - Learn about the night sky by playing a fun game with star charts.
- Birds and Light Pollution (Audubon)
 - How birds are impacted by light pollution during migration and other bird safety concerns.
- Responsible lighting (ANSA)
 - Learn how responsible lighting practices can protect the stars and the environment while also creating a safer and more enjoyable nighttime outdoor experience.
 - Self-certifying your home lighting as night sky friendly.
 - Get information on dealing with light trespass
- The STEM table (NWA)
 - Hands-on experiments involving the creation of impact craters and orbital mechanics. (continuous)
- Wild Ones, Arkansas Monarch and Pollinator Conservation Partnership
 - Learning to use iNaturalist and Seek Apps to find and report on wildlife near you as a citizen scientist, and information/consultation for landscaping with native plants. (4:15, 4:45, 5:15) Check out the lightning bug display any time.
- Solar observing (3:15 – 5:00)
- Solar system model (continuous)
- Children's Activities:
 - Giant bubble blowing (4:00 – 5:00)
 - Stomp Rockets (5:00 – 5:45)

Pavilion Presentations:

4:30 – Welcome and intro to the Festival, weather report, and reminder about activities.

4:45 - 5:30 Lachan Morlan – STEM leadership, community involvement, NWA Space

5:30 – Dinner break & The basics of photographing the Milky Way, 1st of two lectures

7:00 – 7:30 Welcome, intro to the Festival, weather report, reminder about activities, what we will see during the festival and how to participate in the festival's star party, constellation tour, and celestial scavenger hunt. (MC and Rocky Togni)

7:45 – Constellation Tour, Telescope observing, as well as the [Milky Way Photography Workshop](#). (Astronomical twilight begins ~7:49. If cloudy, programming will be announced at the pavilion.)

Saturday

Non-festival Activities - See Friday's list

Festival Activities at Bear Creek

Morning Activities (The walks leave on time from the pavilion; the stream team gathers at the stream crossing; see map)

8:00 – 9:15 AM - Bird Walk – Ken Forman and Karen Molton will lead a bird walk.

9:30 – 10:45 AM – Nature Hike - Jeff Hoeper and Laurie Scott will organize a leisurely nature walk.

11:00 – 12:15 PM – Stream Ecology – NCAMN Stream Team, along with Aquatic Ecologist Katie Morris will lead a water quality session. Discover how water quality, macroinvertebrate insects, crayfish, minnows, and snails are monitored by naturalists.

Afternoon Program:

1:00 - Welcome/Parking open.

1:00 – 2:00 Girl and Boy Scout Astronomy Merit Badge program, Bear Creek Pavilion.

1:00 – 2:00 Active Tabling opens; collect raffle tickets by visiting the tables.

- Observing the Night Sky (CAAS).
 - Using small telescopes and binoculars for sky-watching
 - How to participate in the festival's celestial scavenger hunt
- Connect the Constellations (NCAMN)
 - Learn about the night sky by playing a fun game with star charts.
- Arkansas Science Olympiad
 - Learn about the Arkansas Science Olympiad program and how to start a team in your school, Kate?
- Birds and Light Pollution (Audubon & LOH)
 - How birds are impacted by light pollution during migration and other bird safety concerns.
- Central Arkansas Astronomical Society meteorite table and Solar telescope.
 - Touch, examine, and learn about meteorites (continuous). Geologist, Mike Howard, and UALR Environmental Geologist Katie Hartter will share real and false meteorites.
- Responsible Lighting and General Information (ANSA)
 - Learn about responsible lighting
 - How to self-certify your home lighting as night sky friendly

- Get information on dealing with light trespass
- The STEM table (NWS)
 - Hands-on experiments involving the creation of impact craters and orbital mechanics.
- Wild Ones, Monarch Butterfly Conservation Partnership
 - Learning to use iNaturalist and Seek Apps to find and report on wildlife near you as a citizen scientist, and information/consultation for landscaping with native plants. (4:15, 4:45, 5:15) Check out the lighting bug display anytime.
- Real-time solar observing images (2:00 – 4:30)
- Solar system model (continuous)
- Children's Activities:
 - Stomp Rockets (2:30 – 3:30)
 - Giant bubble blowing (3:30 – 4:30)
 - Children's celestial drawing contest (CAAS)(4:30 – 5:45)
 - Solar-cooked marshmallows & S'mores (2:30 – 3:30)

Pavilion Activities and Presentations:

2:00 – 2:15 Welcome, weather report, and reminder about activities – MC

2:15 - 3:00 Grace Lovett – Great Arkansas Firefly Hunt

3:00 – 3:45 Keith Newton – Photographing Nature at Night

3:45 – 4:30 Ken Forman – How Birds Navigate at Night

4:30 – 5:30 Active Tabling Resumes

5:30 – Dinner break – Planning for a successful Milky Way shoot, 2nd of two lectures

6:45 – Welcome, weather report, reminder about activities, and door prizes – MC

6:55 – Mike Slay & Roger Mangham of AR Nature Conservancy – *Conserving darkness and the critters that need it most.*

7:30 – Constellation Tour, Telescope observing, as well as the [Milky Way Photography Workshop](#). (Astronomical twilight begins ~7:49. If cloudy, programming will be announced at the pavilion.)

Potential Cloudy Night Programs:

- Astronomy Trivia
- Messier Bingo
- The Resurrection of a Giant Refractor 30' Kent Marts
- Learning the Constellations – Rocky Togni
- How Stars are Named – Allen Staib
- A Very Brief History of Observational Astronomy – Jeff Hoyer
- Bird Cast – Lights out Texas: <https://birdcast.info/science-to-action/lights-out/lights-out-texas-documentary/>
- The Hunt for Planet B 90' – NWA Space (Katherine Auld)
- Constellation tour using Stellarium
- What ANSA is doing, where we need volunteers

Notes:

Service dogs –

- 1) You must be confident that your dog is comfortable in crowds in the dark. Evening walks in crowded public places like some parks during events might help your pup be comfortable and obedient in the festival conditions, but does not guarantee it. Needless to say, the animal must be on a leash at all times when on the event grounds.
- 2) There are rechargeable LED collars on Amazon. Choose a red light to respect others' night vision, and don't get a really bright one. This helps others be aware of your dog before you approach.
- 3) A red-light flashlight for yourself is essential to see hazards like tripod legs before you approach. Keep in mind that volunteers often spend thousands on their equipment and volunteer to share it with the public. A dog leash caught up in a tripod can cause enormous damage.
- 4) Be prepared to indicate the nature of the service your animal is trained to provide upon arrival and to remove the animal from the event if it becomes a problem.