

NEWS

Champaign County Forest Preserve District
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LAKE OF THE WOODS FOREST PRESERVE • HOMER LAKE FOREST PRESERVE • MIDDLE FORK RIVER FOREST PRESERVE
SANGAMON RIVER FOREST PRESERVE • RIVER BEND FOREST PRESERVE • KICKAPOO RAIL TRAIL

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Middle Fork River Forest Preserve Receives International Dark Sky Park Designation

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District and the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) are pleased to announce that Middle Fork River Forest Preserve has been officially designated as an International Dark Sky Park, the first such designation in Illinois!

An IDA International Dark Sky Park is a land known for its exceptionally high quality starry nights and a nocturnal environment that is specifically protected for its scientific, natural, educational, and cultural heritage, as well as its public enjoyment. Middle Fork River Forest Preserve joins an exclusive but growing list of [certified IDA International Dark-Sky Parks](#).

Middle Fork River Forest Preserve is located in northeastern Champaign County. The Forest Preserve District's ownership and management of this land ensure that the preserve's rich natural resources and cultural history will be protected in perpetuity. Designation of this forest preserve as an International Dark Sky Park will now also allow for the preservation of the night sky – a natural resource vital to the health of the land and the people and wildlife that inhabit it.

Achieving official Dark Sky Park status is an extensive process. District staff, in cooperation with our own Citizens Advisory Committee and the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society, worked long hours to gather and interpret night sky data, make lighting retrofits, plan and carry out public education forums, and prepare the 100+ page application for official IDA designation.

"We could not be more grateful to the International Dark-Sky Association and the C-U Astronomical Society for their work in protecting one of our greatest natural assets – the star-filled night sky. 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," stated Mary Ellen Wuellner, executive director of the Forest Preserve District. "Our funding partners – the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and the Community Foundation of East Central Illinois – and many private donors made it possible for us to switch out all the exterior lighting at Middle Fork to fully-shielded, dark sky-compliant fixtures. This really was a team effort."

David Leake, director of the Staerkel Planetarium and CUAS member, is thrilled with the designation. "I was overjoyed when I heard the news that we had acquired the first Dark Sky Park in the state. The forest preserve staff and their Citizens Advisory Committee put a lot of work into this project and it paid off. My thanks go out to them, the mayors of Paxton, Rantoul, Urbana and Champaign, and VisitChampaignCounty for their support of this project. Champaign County will now be on the map as far as dark skies go and skywatchers 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 newly dedicated International Dark Sky Park status, Middle Fork River Forest Preserve will celebrate with the public during International Dark Sky week, March 31-April 6, 2019, by throwing a star party. Our valued partner, 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.