

# 7 Tips for Milky Way Photography

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## 1. [Find a location away from light pollution.](#)

The [Dark Site Finder](#) light-pollution map is a great tool. Those of you in the eastern half of the United States have the biggest challenge. A partial solution is to get to the coast and orient toward the sea.

## 2. [Check the calendar.](#)

In the northern hemisphere, the Milky Way is visible from February through early-November. Early and late in its viewing season require a dark southern horizon due to the Milky Way being low in the sky. July and August are prime time as the Milky Way will be high in the sky and you don't have to wait until the wee hours of the morning for it to rise. While looking at the calendar, also check the moon phase. A new moon is best, but a slim crescent can work to illuminate your foreground.

## 3. [Break out an app.](#)

With an app like Photopills you can check when the Milky Way will be visible, what the moon phase is, when the moon rises and sets, and even get an augmented reality view of where the Milky Way will appear at different times of the night.

## 4. [Get focused.](#)

Turn off autofocus, especially if your autofocus is tied to your shutter button. You don't want the camera to start hunting as it tries to focus when you hit the shutter. Instead, focus manually. One way: focus on a distant object in daylight and tape the focus ring in place, or note the position of the distance scale. Alternatively, go to live view and magnify the image as much as possible while pointing at a bright star or planet. Turn the focus ring until the star is at its smallest and you'll get sharp stars.

## 5. Keep those stars sharp.

The old rule of thumb was to divide 500 by your focal length to determine the exposure time that keeps the stars from streaking. With today's high-resolution cameras it's probably better to use 300. For example, if using a 30mm lens you'd have a 10-second exposure ( $300/30=10$ ). A 15mm lens would give you a 20 second exposure, etc.

## 6. Set aperture & ISO.

The 300 rule is going to give you fairly short exposure times for such a dark scene. To compensate, use the widest possible aperture and raise your ISO. With a 24mm f/1.4 lens, I find ISO 1600 works well. At smaller apertures you'll need higher ISOs.

## 7. Lights out!

Other than perhaps light painting something in the foreground, **do not** turn on any other light no matter how dim during your exposure! (This is why **communication is crucial** when photographing the Milky Way with a group!) Even the little red light on the back of the camera can cause a red glow in your shot. Put a piece of black tape over the light. Also, learn how to change your settings without turning on a light. Practice before your night shoot until you can change shutter speed, ISO and aperture while looking through the viewfinder without using external light.

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Award-winning nature & wildlife photographer, Jeff Parker, leads photo tours & workshops for the naturally curious throughout North, Central & South America. Please join him!

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