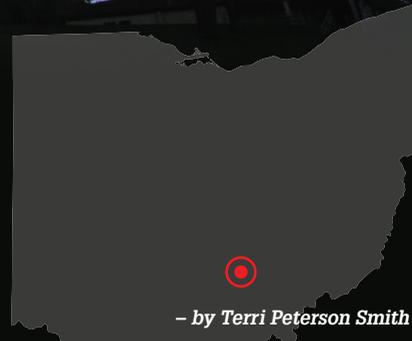




HOCKING HILLS, OHIO

Out of this World

Gazing at far-off galaxies from John Glenn Astronomy Park, Ohio's new dark-sky venue



— by Terri Peterson Smith

It's a clear night in Hocking Hills State Park in southeastern Ohio. Step out your RV's door, walk a short distance from the campground, and you'll enter a different world of intensely dark skies and very bright stars.

The Hocking Hills area abounds with caves, waterfalls, cliffs and gorges, but it also offers what has become a rare natural wonder: pristine dark skies. That made Hocking Hills State Park the perfect place to build the new John Glenn Astronomy Park (JGAP), where nature lovers and astronomers alike may view dazzling stars and planets the way our ancestors did, without the impact of city lights.

Before his death in 2016, astronaut and U.S. Senator John Glenn enthusiastically agreed to lend his name to the park, which opened in June, just in time for the summer solstice. Even during the day, JGAP offers visitors

a chance to learn about the solar system. Many features of its 80-foot Solar Plaza demonstrate the sun's orientation to the earth and how it changes throughout the year.

JGAP shines brightest on Friday and Saturday nights when Director Brad Hoehne conducts astronomy programs with local volunteers, many from the Columbus Astronomical Society and Ohio University. They enthusiastically share their love of the cosmos with those new to stargazing as well as seasoned amateur astronomers who bring their own telescopes. For capturing images of the night sky, JGAP offers the use of telescopes designed specifically for astrophotography.

Most exciting, though, is when the roof of the new observatory rolls back to reveal the huge reflecting telescope. Hoehne says, "I call it the 'Wow!' or the 'Whoa!' telescope because that's what people say when they look

through it and see the planets, moon and stars as they've never seen them before." He says globular clusters of stars are the biggest showstoppers. "One called M13, for example, contains over one and a half million stars and makes a ghostly haze in the dark sky." *Whoa!*

The park and its campgrounds are open year-round, but Hoehne and friends will put the seasonal Friday and Saturday programming on hold from the end of November through March. Admission is free, but donations are welcome.

John Glenn Astronomy Park
www.jgap.info

HOCKING HILLS STATE PARK

Open year-round, the main campground accommodates RVs on 169 sites, most with hookups. Amenities include a swimming pool, campground store, hot showers, flush toilets, laundry facilities and a dump station. parks.ohiodnr.gov/hockinghills

↑ A short walk from the campground at Ohio's Hocking Hills State Park leads to the new John Glenn Astronomy Park, with dark skies and dazzling views of the stars and Milky Way.