

Look on the bright side

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LEWISTOWN — Star power was on display in a big way Wednesday for a party outside Lewistown.

The stars provided a backdrop for the Perseids Meteor Shower, an annual mid-August display of "falling stars" at The Nature Conservancy's Emiquon Preserve.

More than two dozen "star party" guests stretched out on blankets or reclined in lawn chairs starting at 3:30 a.m. to view the show. While the crowd waited minutes for the next streak across the sky, Dr. John Martin, assistant professor of astronomy and physics at the University of Illinois at Springfield, spoke about the science of the sky.

The meteors are actually very small, he said, with particles around the size of a pea. Made of ice, gases and dust, they shoot around at speeds of around 20,000 miles per hour, heating the air in front of them and causing it to glow. Only large meteors, at least the size of a softball, make it through the atmosphere, Martin said.

He also explained the Northern Lights and entertained with the myths of Orion, Pegasus, the queen Cassiopeia and others.

Martin used a laser pointer to show the locations of constellations, the Milky Way, the neighboring galaxy Andromeda and other highlights. The random canvas of shining dots became clearer under his direction.

"That's Betelgeuse - also know as Orion's armpit," he said, pointing toward a bright star with a red hue that is pronounced like the Michael Keaton movie character.

The 7,000-acre wetland restoration of Emiquon provided a serene backdrop for the Perseids show. A humming bullfrog, singing crickets and cackling birds provided the sound effects, along with the occasional, "Ooh" from the crowd when a meteor streak was spotted.

About 4:30, the screeching of a nearby pack of coyotes drew attention. Their rising wails were intermixed with honking noises.

"Sounds like there might be some geese in there," Martin said.

Emiquon Audubon Society members and friends Kris Boudreau and Miriam Greene of Mason City and Diana Waren of Havana all enjoyed the shower and stayed to watch the sunrise paint the sky above Thompson Lake with shades of pink and blue.

"It's just a lot of fun," Waren said. "I'm just so grateful for everything they're doing here."

Dr. Michael Lemke, associate professor of biology and director of UIS' Emiquon Field Station, said he was pleased with the event.

"I think it's excellent," he said. "This is what we want here. This is hands-on. We want people coming here - touching, smelling, seeing."

Lemke said another "star party" will be held in a couple of weeks, starting late at night rather than early in the morning. Attendees will be able to bring telescopes and spot planets and constellations in the clear night sky of the preserve.

Martin said Emiquon is an ideal location for such parties.

"It's hard to find a site this dark anymore in Illinois," he said.

He also drew parallels to the site's history as a home for hundreds of generations of American Indians. The site was later drained and converted to farmland but is rapidly taking the shape of its former life as a wetland because of the restoration.

"The night sky has always been there," Martin said. "It's something we share with all our ancestors."

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