

BONUS: Beginning Photography Tips from the Unphotographer

One of the things that surprises people most about me is that I am not an Aurora photographer. At least, I don't consider myself one, although on rare occasions I have taken gorgeous photos of the Northern Lights. Instead, I am drawn to the experience of watching the Northern Lights dance with my own eyes, to enjoy one of nature's rare natural phenomenon in all her glory!

I find the act of viewing the Aurora Borealis with the unaided eye invigorating and amazing. The mystery, wonder and unmistakable electric sensation of each display inspires my creativity and my writing long after the brilliant colors, movement, and light subside.

Sure, I've taken test shots of the sky on quiet nights to try to detect the presence of the Aurora from the mid-latitudes before it becomes visible to the naked eye. But I usually do this using my cell phone camera. Also, it wasn't until the release of newer mobile phones like the iPhone 14 that I was able to capture a crystal clear photo of the Aurora Borealis at night, with minimal effort, glorious moonlit foregrounds and nearly perfect pinpoint stars in the composition.

Phone cameras have come a long way, especially since 2020! So, it might be time for you to cash in that upgrade, and experiment with taking night sky photographs on your own device.

That's not to say DSLR photography is going out of style. I personally believe phones will never replace the sheer beauty and expert nightscapes that can be captured using the advanced cameras, lenses, accessories, remotes and other technology that abound in the photography world. If you are seriously interested in pursuing Aurora photography, I highly recommend picking up a DSLR camera.

Over the years, I've spent a lot of time with photographers, recruiting speakers to offer workshops to beginners and watching these artists as they capture the Northern Lights in the night sky. While I am not a seasoned Aurora photographer, I can give you some essential advice that will make a world of difference for you when you are starting out. These tips will take you far in your journey to create stunning night sky images.

1. Take a test shot.

As you now know, the Northern Lights are not always visible to the unaided eye. Use any camera or device on manual settings and take a test shot any time you think Aurora may be present. You may be surprised to see that the camera registers vivid color, even when your eyes see nothing.

2. Always use a tripod.

As the Aurora dances across the sky, capturing a photo that is not blurry, grainy or ruined with noise becomes one of the biggest challenges. A tripod is a game changer. Make sure you bring a tripod any time you want to photograph the Northern Lights, even if you are hoping to photograph them using your cell phone. The tripod will ensure that you can take clear, focused photographs, and in the case of cell phones, it may be the ticket to activating your long exposure settings.

3. Skip the telescope, go manual, and get a wider lens.

A telescope won't help you see the Northern Lights, because it will narrow your view and focus on pinpoint areas of the night sky. Instead, you'll want to have as broad a view as possible. Ideally, the Aurora will become so strong that they will leap overhead — and the lights might even dance above or behind you.

Skip the automatic functions on your camera and go manual. Learn to use your camera in manual mode, adjusting your aperture and shutter speed to the ideal settings for that particular display. The settings you use may vary with each show, just as the brightness, color, and speed of the Aurora will vary.

If you're lucky enough to catch a geomagnetic storm or view an all-sky display, you'll want a wide camera lens. Some displays may only be visible low on the horizon, but other displays will give you an opportunity to capture Aurora directly overhead or to catch the famous STEVE, as the sub-auroral arc stretches from one horizon to the other.

4. Never try to learn your equipment on the chase.

The biggest mistake many new photographers make is to buy a camera hours before they photograph an Aurora, without ever having used the camera in daylight. This happens with tripods, too. Believe it or not, it's really difficult to learn new camera gear in the dark!

Do yourself a favor and practice setting up your tripod and camera before the big night. Experiment with your settings and lenses. Test out your remote. Pack extra batteries in case your batteries run out of juice in the middle of the display. The more prepared you are for a Northern Lights display, the more relaxing the experience will be.

5. Now's your time! Focus on a star.

One of the most difficult obstacles for beginning astrophotographers is focusing in the dark. After your camera is secured on the tripod, placed in the right position, and set to manual, start the night by focusing on a star. This will help you keep your camera in focus, even as the dynamic Northern Lights begin their lively and unpredictable dance.

RESOURCE > *Find articles and video tutorials that will help you learn what you need to know to get started in Aurora photography. For links to these online resources, visit:*

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