

Northern Lights at the Top of the Keweenaw in April

written by Chris Guibert | April 10, 2022

Photographing the auroras (also referred to as the “northern lights”) can be a challenging hobby in the lower 48 states of the United States. To be successful you have to have patience, diligence and most importantly the ability to stay up late or get up really, really early. Timing is be a big factor, not just in the solar activity but the timing of what is happening in your life. I am always asking: What do I have to accomplish tomorrow? Do I have to go to work? Am I tired from working or playing all day? Answers to these questions play a factor in my photography activities, along with how the solar winds are interacting with the Earth’s magnetic field all have to align together to get good photographs of the northern lights. Last night, April 9th, everything came into alignment.

The Keweenaw is one of the best places in Michigan to see the Northern Lights. Aaron Spray states in his article, [*Can You See The Northern Lights In The Lower 48?*](#)

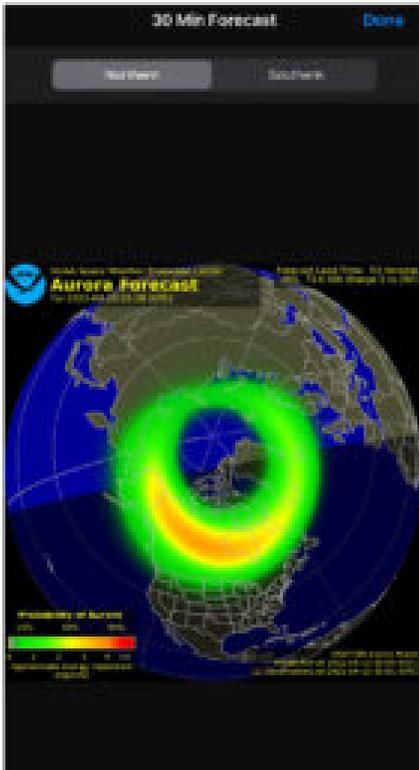
“While northern lights most commonly occur within the geographic area beneath what is known as the auroral oval. This is between the latitudes of 60 and 75 degrees north. The lands within that zone include Iceland, parts of Russia, Canada, Alaska, Finland, Norway, southern Greenland, and Sweden. Unfortunately, this Goldilocks zone does not include the Lower 48. While most of the action occurs within that oval, it can appear at lower latitudes. The activity is also not consistent and the auroral oval is constantly shifting. If and when the conditions are right one can catch the auroras in most of the northern border

states – like Maine or Montana.”

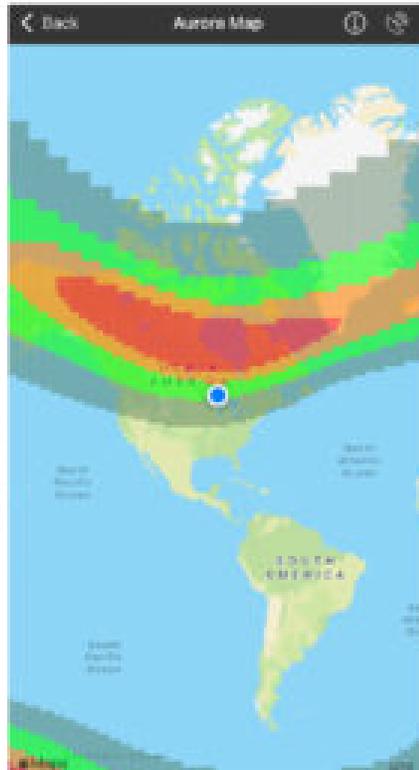
The advantage that the Keweenaw Peninsula has over other places in the Midwest is that we are the northernmost land mass in Michigan, in which the peninsula is surrounded by a large body of water: Lake Superior. Some of the best places on the Keweenaw Peninsula are just a few miles from the Keweenaw Mountain Lodge, along highway M-26 between Eagle River and Copper Harbor.



I live about 15 miles from the Lodge, on Lac La Belle. Last night I was getting ready for bed around midnight and I got a message from a friend, Craig, who lives in Escanaba, 200 miles south of here, “Look North right now AURORA.” I get a spark of energy. He then sends me a picture of the lights visible from his house in the city. Now I am motivated. I quickly checked the two apps on my phone, [Aurora Forecast](#) and [My Aurora Forecast](#). Being a visual person (remember, I am a photographer by mindset), I mostly just look at the maps on the apps and it’s looking promising.



Map from Aurora App



Map from Aurora Forecast App

The view from my house on Lac La Belle looking North is blocked by the [Mount Bohemia](#) ski area. So I put on my cold weather gear, grabbed my camera bag and tripod, and drove to the south side of [Lac La Belle](#) to hopefully capture Mount Bohemia with the lights behind it. I scrambled through a friend's driveway and headed out onto the thick ice of Lac La Belle. Sure enough I can see them over the Keweenaw Ridge illuminating Mount Bohemia. I started shooting photos.



Mount Bohemia – April 10, 2022 1:00 am – – Camera settings:15 seconds F3.5 ISO 1250

October – April are the best parts of the year to have a chance of seeing the Northern Lights in the Keweenaw. The best days of the month to shoot the northern lights are as close to the new moon as possible, usually the window that is four days before and the four days after. That is because there is less moonlight brightening the sky and “washing out” the northern lights. I was not in that window last night, but the aurora activity was strong so the lights remained visible. Instead I decided to use the moon in an element of the composition in a self portrait.



Keweenaw Ridge, Mount Bohemia and Lac La Belle – April 10, 2022
1:30am – 15 seconds F3.5 ISO 1250 – iPhone flashlight used for subject lighting

After taking almost 40 exposures I become tempted to move locations. I knew the harbor was starting to thaw out in the town of Copper Harbor and that there was a possibility of photographing some reflections in the open water. It is a 15 mile drive to Copper Harbor (close to the Keweenaw Mountain Lodge). Some clouds were moving in on the horizon. I quickly decided I am going to “Go For It!” I hustle back to the car, drink a Redbull, and hit the gas to head down US Hwy 41.

I arrive in Copper Harbor at around 2am and I am stoked. There are some clouds but they are being lit by both the moon and the northern lights creating a unique and dynamic scene. I walk the shoreline and find some chunks of ice floating right off shore.

I compose the photo and begin to shoot.



Copper Harbor Ice, Hunters Point and Porters Island – April 10, 2022 2:15 am – Camera settings: 15 seconds F3.5 ISO 1000

I take about 20 shots of the same composition. The ice is slightly moving so I am hoping that in one of the shots it will be still for 15 seconds. I am also slightly adjusting the manual focus on the lens because it is too dark for auto focus. I set the focus to infinity and then make minute adjustments backing out the focusing ring on the lens. I do this again for a second composition. I am getting tired so I set up one more shot of just the open water with Hunter's Point and Porters Island splitting the image.



Copper Harbor, Hunters Point and Porters Island – April 10, 2022
3:00 am – Camera settings: 15 seconds F2.8 ISO 1250

At that point I was exhausted. It was past 3am by this time. I pack the camera and start to head back to the car. The northern lights were still illuminating the horizon but I was done. I started my drive back to Lac La Belle excited about the images I was able to capture. I will say I am tired today as I write this, but I am happy with the results and truly enjoyed the experience of being outside in the middle of the night on a not so cold April evening (temperature was between 31 and 36 degrees, midnight to 3am, per the [Lodge's weather station](#)). Oh yeah, I forgot to say, "Hey Craig, Thanks for the message! I have a print for you the next time you are back in the Keweenaw!"

The Keweenaw Mountain Lodge's next [Night Sky Photography](#)

[Workshop is April 30, 2022](#). This is on the new moon and an ideal time for a chance to photograph the night sky, or see, the northern lights.



[Chris Guibert](#)

Chris Guibert: I have a strong passion for all things outdoors and have worked as a tour guide and professional photographer for the last twenty five years. As the Lead of Outdoor Activities at the Mountain Lodge I want make sure you and your family have a great experience while staying and playing. Please feel free to ask me any questions about the trails, regional activities and local secrets.

