

Celestial Showers

By Joan Black

We were staying at our cabin in the small western town of Westcliffe situated high in the mountains at 7,800 feet, nestled between the Sangre de Cristo and Wet Mountain Ranges. It was a cold, clear moonless evening and we really hated to leave the warmth of the blazing log fire but we also really wanted to watch the Meteor Shower predicted for that night. We dressed warmly – layer upon layer of winter clothing – stowed a couple of old blankets and a large thermos of hot chocolate into the truck and drove half a mile up the mountain to the parking area at the Venable trail head.

We had the small area to ourselves – apparently nobody else wanted to venture out on such a frosty night – that was just fine with us. It was so quiet that we instinctively spoke in whispers as we bailed out of the car and took up position on an old wooden picnic table. We looked up – the bare trunks of the tall pine trees swayed in the light breeze and made us dizzy until we adjusted our sense of balance. The dome of the night sky was filled with hundreds, thousands, MILLIONS of stars! For the two children who had never witnessed anything but City Skies, they were absolutely awestruck – and then, gasps of delight as meteors started shooting across the sky and stars seemed to be 'falling' in showers. "Look – a red one! I see a green one! There's two together! Oh Wow! It's like fireworks" said one kid. Better, said the other – these are REAL not man-made in China! For an hour we sat, sipping chocolate and oohing and pointing – but you had to look quickly, stars showered down and burned out and were gone in a flash. The show continued but we became just too darn cold and that took away the pleasure of witnessing this spectacular, so reluctantly we packed up and drove back down the mountain to our warm, cozy cabin.

Westcliffe and its adjacent sister city, Silvercliffe realized 15 years ago that their geographic location was unique and they applied to the International Dark Skies Assn. to be designated a Dark Skies Community. And after finally complying with all the necessary lighting restrictions in the one-main-road downtown area (all lights must reflect downward and be below a certain wattage) they received such a designation just last year. There are only seven such communities in the U.S. And only nine in the whole world.

This coming Wednesday and Thursday the Perseid Meteor Showers will put on a show between 11:00 p.m. and 4.30 a.m. Make the three-hour drive to southwestern Colorado and see the Dark Skies light up. Dress warmly, stock up on hot chocolate and prepare to be amazed.