

## Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Dark Sky Novitsky 01GJJYZG33H3NCTJ9W3F5MG2VR

CATHY WURZER: Think about this. As long as humans have walked the Earth, they've stepped out of their shelters at night, looked at the sky, and come face to face with the universe. That is until the past, oh, 100 years or so. Now, many of us look up and see the glow of electric lights. A new documentary looks at the history and science behind Northern Minnesota's night skies as well as Indigenous star knowledge and the impact of light pollution.

*Northern Nights, Starry Skies* is a production of Hamlin University's Center for Global Environmental Education, in partnership with WDSC, the PBS member station in Duluth. Travis Novitsky is a night sky photographer and a tribal member of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa whose photographs and stories are included in the documentary. And he is on the line. Travis, it is my pleasure. Welcome to the program.

**TRAVIS NOVITSKY:** Hi, Cathy. Thank you. It's an honor to be here today. Thanks for inviting me.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh, it's my pleasure. Thanks for being here. How would you like to introduce yourself?

**TRAVIS NOVITSKY:** Well, I have a greeting that I give, so I will do that.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

And so as my greeting there, I just introduced, hello, all my relatives. My name is Travis. I am Bear Clan, and I am from Grand Portage.

**CATHY WURZER:** And I am glad you're with us. Thank you so much. And you are lucky to live in the area designated dark sky place, which is fantastic. What is a dark sky place, for folks who are not familiar with that?

**TRAVIS NOVITSKY:** So recently, there have been three areas designated as protected dark sky places or designated dark sky places, and those are the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Voyageurs National Park, and Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario. And so those are areas that meet certain dark sky qualifications based on something called the Bortle scale, which measures-- actually measures light pollution and how bad it is. So in these areas, it's about as low as you can get. So that means lower the number, the more stars and better views of the Milky Way.

**CATHY WURZER:** So are you living around the Boundary Waters?

**TRAVIS NOVITSKY:** I do. I live right on the eastern boundary of-- just outside the eastern boundary of the Boundary Waters. So I live just a few miles from the Canada Border. And yeah, the dark sky is like-- I can go out my back door and see the Milky Way and see the Northern Lights and see all of these constellations. I'm very fortunate to have those views right outside my door.

**CATHY WURZER:** How did you end up becoming a photographer of the night sky?

**TRAVIS NOVITSKY:** My main inspiration I would have to say is my dad. He did a lot of this stuff that I'm doing now. But he was doing it on film back when I was a little kid. And my mom says whenever he would go out with his camera-- even at a very young age I didn't even understand how cameras worked, but I always wanted to go with him. Just because I like being outside at night. I've always loved the night. It's always been a special thing for me.

**CATHY** I want to talk about this documentary. But I have to say I'm a huge fan of your work, and so the fact that I get to talk with you today is really a treat for me. And I'm wondering-- oh, absolutely. You've got such beautiful photos that you've taken. What's your process for going out on a night shoot?

**TRAVIS** Well, it is definitely a process. It's not something that I typically do spontaneously. Although I do do that as well.  
**NOVITSKY:** But usually I spend a lot of time actually in the daylight hours. So if I'm out, whether it's just hiking or driving around in the National Forest on some gravel roads or out canoeing or biking or maybe skiing in the wintertime or snowshoeing, I'm always on the lookout for potential locations. Either that I'm already familiar with or maybe I haven't discovered yet. And just always having an eye for where the Milky Way might line up when I'm in a place.

So if I find a lakeshore that has a really intriguing curve to the shoreline with some nice pine trees or something like that, I'll be looking at the direction and thinking ahead to what that spot-- pre-visualizing what that area would look like at night, whether the Milky Way would line up or whether it'd be a good spot for some Northern Lights. And then I'll start to plan for when I might want to go back there at night to try to capture these things. So there's a lot. In some cases, there's many, many, many hours, if not years, before I returned to a spot to actually photograph it.

**CATHY** Wow. You must be a night owl.

**WURZER:**

**TRAVIS** I am, off and on. I'm definitely the kind of person that likes to stay up late versus get up early in the morning. But  
**NOVITSKY:** the forecasting tools that we have today when it comes to Northern Lights, for example, have gotten so much better that you don't have to spend as much time just going out and hoping for the best like we used to in the old days.

Spaceweather.com, if I can give a shout out to that website, is a fantastic tool. And it's the number one reference that I use to help me be more productive and actually nowadays spend less time outside but end up with more and better images than I used to. Because of the forecasting tools being so good. So, yeah.

**CATHY** Your images are fantastic, and I'm glad that you're in the first few minutes of this film and you're talking about  
**WURZER:** your experiences photographing the night sky. Some of your photos, of course, many of your photos are in the doc. I love the River of Souls, the Milky Way photos. Why the River of Souls? What does that mean?

**TRAVIS** So for the Ojibwe people and really Carl Gawboy, who was really involved in the making of this as well, is a better  
**NOVITSKY:** authority to speak about that. But I'll do my best here. So as I learned from Carl, the Milky Way is known as this pathway of souls or river of souls. And he has said in other cultures, it is more of a pathway where it's something that you would walk to the afterlife.

But in our area and for the Ojibwe people, because there are so many lakes and rivers and waterways, for us, it's the River of Souls. So it's something that you would embark, let's say, in a canoe on as you make your journey to the afterlife. And if you lived a good and proper life, you would follow that path to the afterlife, basically.

**CATHY** Carl, I know he's preserved a lot of the Ojibwe star knowledge. Did he share any stories with you?

**WURZER:**

**TRAVIS** Yeah, yeah. I've learned a few throughout the process of this and spent quite a few hours sitting down with Carl.  
**NOVITSKY:** And it's been really just a cool thing for me to sit down and learn from him. Because in my community, I didn't know of anyone that really was a carrier of Ojibwe star knowledge. And Carl to me is the authority on that. So it's really been an honor to spend time with him and learn from him.

**CATHY** Does that knowledge help you when you're taking your photographs in a way? In any way.  
**WURZER:**

**TRAVIS** I would say that it definitely influences how I approach things now. And maybe the best example of that is how I  
**NOVITSKY:** look at the constellations now. So for example, I used to look up and see in the wintertime arguably our most prominent constellation for us is Orion. And I've always looked at Orion as this smaller constellation where you have Orion's belt, you have the sash that hangs down. You've got the four stars that make the feet and the hands.

But to the Ojibwe, Orion is known as the Winter Maker. Because that constellation starts rising in the fall, early fall, as our seasons are getting colder and winter is approaching. And by the time Orion is highest in the sky and it's most prominent-- or Winter Maker, I should say, is when we're in the very deepest, darkest, coldest depths of our winter. And then as the constellation goes back down to the horizon, we're coming into spring. And so Winter Maker's power is losing its grip on us at that time.

But Winter Maker as a constellation includes additional stars that are not part of Orion. And mainly it's the hands are much more outstretched or the arms. So you see these other stars that are extensions of those closer stars to Orion's body. And so when I look up and see Orion now, I cannot see just Orion. I see Winter Maker. I just can't unsee it. And so that experience of spending time with Carl and working on this documentary and learning all of this stuff, it's changing without even thinking about it how I look at the stars.

**CATHY** Thanks for saying that. Thanks for telling that story. Travis, I wish I had more time with you. Thank you so much  
**WURZER:** for telling me about the documentary. I'm excited to see it.

**TRAVIS** Yeah, yeah. Thank you for having me again.  
**NOVITSKY:**

**CATHY** Travis Novitsky appears in this new documentary *Northern Nights, Starry Skies* along with his night sky  
**WURZER:** photography. Premieres on WDSC in Duluth. That's PBS December the First. It will become available to other PBS member stations at a later date. By the way, you can see Travis' photography on his website, [travisnovitsky-- that's N-O-V-I-T-S-K-Y.com](http://travisnovitsky.com).