

Get out of Edinburgh to the Dark Sky observatory

Not just yet, but it will be available soon. This week we have all been marvelling at the photographs of the Aurora Borealis, even one or two taken in Edinburgh itself, which is difficult with all the light pollution overhead. Enterprise Minister Fergus Ewing yesterday marked the start of work on the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory – the first of its kind in Scotland – which will create a state-of-the-art visitor attraction for budding stargazers and astronomers in Britain's only dark sky park.

The new facility will be located in Galloway Forest Park, one of only 10 parks in the world to be recognised by the International Dark Sky Association. The new observatory builds on the park's 'dark sky' status and offers visitors a chance to observe the Northern Lights, the Milky Way, planets, comets and shooting stars.

The observatory is receiving £94,000 funding from the Scottish Government. As well as attracting astronomers, the facility will be an educational resource for schools, colleges and universities. The project hopes to capitalise on the recent popularity of the BBC's Stargazing Live programme, which captured the imagination of almost 3.8 million viewers this month.

The site chosen for the observatory is within a pristine landscape and has been confirmed the best possible by the Royal Observatory, with the darkest skies of the Dark Sky Park.

Mr Ewing took part in a ground breaking event at the observatory site today to mark the start of work on the project. The observatory is due to open in September 2012.

The Minister said:

“Scotland has made an immense contribution to shaping the modern world through science and research excellence, and this new observatory builds on our reputation as a hotbed of innovation and ideas.

“The creation of a state-of-the-art, first of its kind in Britain, observatory will attract stargazers and astronomers from near and far. Almost four million people tuned into the BBC’s Stargazing Live programme and it is hoped that this new observatory will capitalise on the success of the show and capture the imagination of people of all ages.

“The Galloway Forest Park area enjoys some of the darkest skies in the world and this new facility will showcase the area’s stunning natural scenery and resources to attract new visitors and investment to Ayrshire.”

Observatory Manager Cath Seeds said:

“We have worked so hard over the last two years to generate the enthusiasm and raise funds for this project. It is wonderful that we can come together today and officially start the construction of the Observatory.

“We could not have come this far without the support of all our funders; Ayrshire LEADER; Scottish Government; Cumnock and Doon Valley Minerals Trust; East Ayrshire Council; The Monument Trust; William Grant & Sons Ltd; Eden Charitable Trust; Barr Environmental through the Landfill Communities Fund; James Weir Foundation; The Robertson Trust; and Coalfields Regeneration Trust. Together we will bring astronomy to all.”

“Often, the science can feel overwhelming, so we want the observatory to break down these barriers by bringing together astronomy, nocturnal natural history and arts and crafts inspired by the night sky.

“We also want to play a key role in the future development of this area. Great things are occurring and great talent is abundant. Our role is to improve science in our community, whether by inspiring the next generation of scientists or providing the spark needed by an inventor to produce something truly remarkable.”

Depute Leader of East Ayrshire Council Councillor Iain Linton said:

“The Dark Sky Observatory will be a huge asset for East Ayrshire in terms of the tourism and educational benefits it will bring to the area. It will hopefully attract not only local visitors, but many tourists and keen stargazers from around the world who I’m sure will be extremely impressed with the new facility. This in turn will act as a catalyst for the regeneration of the area and will really put East Ayrshire on the map.”