DARK SKY UTAH

Milky Way Quick-Start Checklist

Check each box as you prepare to shoot

When to Shoot

- [ ] The Milky Way core is visible (March through October)
- [ ] New Moon or Moon below the horizon during Core visibility
- [ ] Milky Way Core is visible without a bright Moon for more than an hour
- [ ] Clear skies forecast
- [ ] Milky Way position and visibility time checked in PhotoPills or Stellarium

Where to Shoot

- [ ] Dark sky location selected
- [ ] Area Open to public access available after dark
- [ ] Permission obtained from the landowner for private land
- [ ] You can reach it in your vehicle
- [ ] You know the route to the location and how far you need to hike or walk
- [ ] Clear view toward the south
- [ ] Minimal nearby light sources
- [ ] Strong foreground identified

Gear Checklist

- [ ] Camera (DSLR or mirrorless)
- [ ] Wide-angle lens (14–24mm ideal)
- [ ] Tripod
- [ ] Extra batteries
- [ ] Memory card (s)
- [ ] Headlamp or flashlight
- [ ] Warm clothing
- [ ] Hat and Gloves

Optional Helpful Gear Checklist

- [ ] Intervalometer
- [ ] L-bracket
- [ ] Lens with a different focal length
- [ ] Lens heater or hand warmers, and rubber bands to prevent lens fog

Camera Settings

- [ ] Manual mode
- [ ] Aperture at the lowest possible f-number (f/2 to f/2.8 if possible)

- [ ] Calculate the Max shutter speed with an app or the 300 rule (300/focal length)
- [ ] ISO 3200–6400
- [ ] White balance 3800–4200K or Auto
- [ ] Manual focus enabled
- [ ] RAW file format
- [ ] Image stabilization OFF
- [ ] Long exposure noise reduction OFF

Focus Steps

- [ ] Aim at a bright star or distant light
- [ ] Switch to Live View
- [ ] Zoom in to 10x
- [ ] Adjust focus using the focus ring until the star is the smallest and sharpest
- [ ] Take a test shot
- [ ] Zoom in and confirm sharpness
- [ ] Check focus every 60 minutes or if you move your camera (not during time-lapse)

Reset Checklist

Want to go beyond the basics? Inside Milky Way in Motion, I walk you through my complete advanced workflow. From planning and shooting to professional editing and cinematic Milky Way time-lapses. If you're ready to take your night photography to the next level, tap below to learn more.

Explore the Full Course