

Aurora
Field Guide
for Citizen Science



Acknowledgments

This project was supported by the International Space Science Institute (ISSI) in Bern in Switzerland through the ISSI Working Group [ARCTICS](#) - Auroral Research Coordination: Towards Internationalised Citizen Science.

Thanks go to the members of the working group who have contributed their time and photos for this field guide.

Core Contributors: Donna Lach, Katie Herlingshaw, Marjan Spijkers, Noora Partamies, Lena Mielke, Maxime Grandin, Minna Glad, Les Ladbrook, Colin Legg, Eero Karvinen, Emma Bruus, Carlos Martinis, Matti Helin, Vincent Ledvina, Rowan Dayton-Oxland, John Andersen, Dave Knudsen, Alan Dyer, Sophie Cordon, Mikko Syrjäsuo

*Donna
Lach*

Contents

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Welcome!
- 1.2 Explanation of the Guide
- 1.3 What is the Aurora?
- 1.4 Aurora Colours & Altitudes
- 1.5 When to Go Out?
- 1.6 Taking Photos for Science
- 1.7 Camera Tips: Settings & General
- 1.8 Camera Tips: How to Focus
- 1.9 Field Checklist: What to Take

2. The Colors of the Aurora

- 2.1 Green Aurora
- 2.2 Red Aurora
- 2.3 Blue (Purple, Pink) Aurora
- 2.4 Sunlit Top
- 2.5 Black Aurora

2.6 Great Red Aurora

2.7 Dayside Aurora

3. Discrete Aurora

- 3.1 Quiet Arc
- 3.2 Active Arc
- 3.3 Rays, "Pillars"
- 3.4 Rayed Arc, "Curtain"
- 3.5 Bands
- 3.6 Beads
- 3.7 Curls
- 3.8 Folds
- 3.9 Spiral, "Cinnamon Roll"
- 3.10 Corona
- 3.11 Westward Traveling Surge
- 3.12 Enhanced Aurora

Contents

4. Diffuse Aurora

- 4.1 Diffuse, “Veil”
- 4.2 Omega Bands
- 4.3 Pulsating Aurora/Patches
- 4.4 Giant Undulations
- 4.5 Dunes
- 4.6 Isolated Proton Aurora (IPA)
- 4.7 Continuum
- 4.8 Fragments

5. Sub-Auroral Optical Emissions

- 5.1 STEVE (Strong Thermal Emission Velocity Enhancements)

5.2 Picket Fence, “Pickets”

- 5.3 Streaks
- 5.4 SAR (Stable Auroral Red) Arc
- 5.5 RAGDA (Red Arc with Green Diffuse Aurora)
- 5.6 SAMPS (Sub Auroral Morning Proton Spots)

6. The Reality of Observations

- 6.1 Mixtures of Different Types of Aurora
- 6.2 Global Emissions: Airglow

7. Aurora Reporting Websites

1. Introduction



Photo Credit:
Eero Karvinen

1.1 Welcome!

Welcome to all citizen scientists and scientists who observe and study the aurora!

We hope this document can be helpful during your valuable work and communication with each other.

We have also written a handbook with much more detailed information, which you can find [**HERE**](#).

1.2 Explanation of the Guide

The aurora can appear in many shapes, colours and types of movement. Within these forms are auroral phenomena that have names (both scientific and common terms). Some of these optical features are not aurora, but can be visible with the aurora.

Here are some terms that can be used when a scientist is communicating about what they are studying or when a citizen scientist is communicating about what they see in their photos.

This is **NOT** intended as a formal aurora classification list, but as terms helpful for communication.

1.3 What is the Aurora?

The aurora is the emission of light caused by collisions between energetic charged particles with atoms and molecules in the upper atmosphere, primarily in polar regions.

[Read More](#)

1.4 Aurora Colours & Altitudes

- The auroral emissions come from oxygen atoms and nitrogen molecules in our atmosphere
- Red and green light is from oxygen atoms
- Blue/purple light is from nitrogen molecules
- Red is at the highest altitude, followed by green and then blue/purple aurora
- Two different colours of aurora in the same place may appear as a different colour to your eye
- Aurora seen far in the distance may seem purely red, since it is so far away that you only see the colour of the top of the curtain

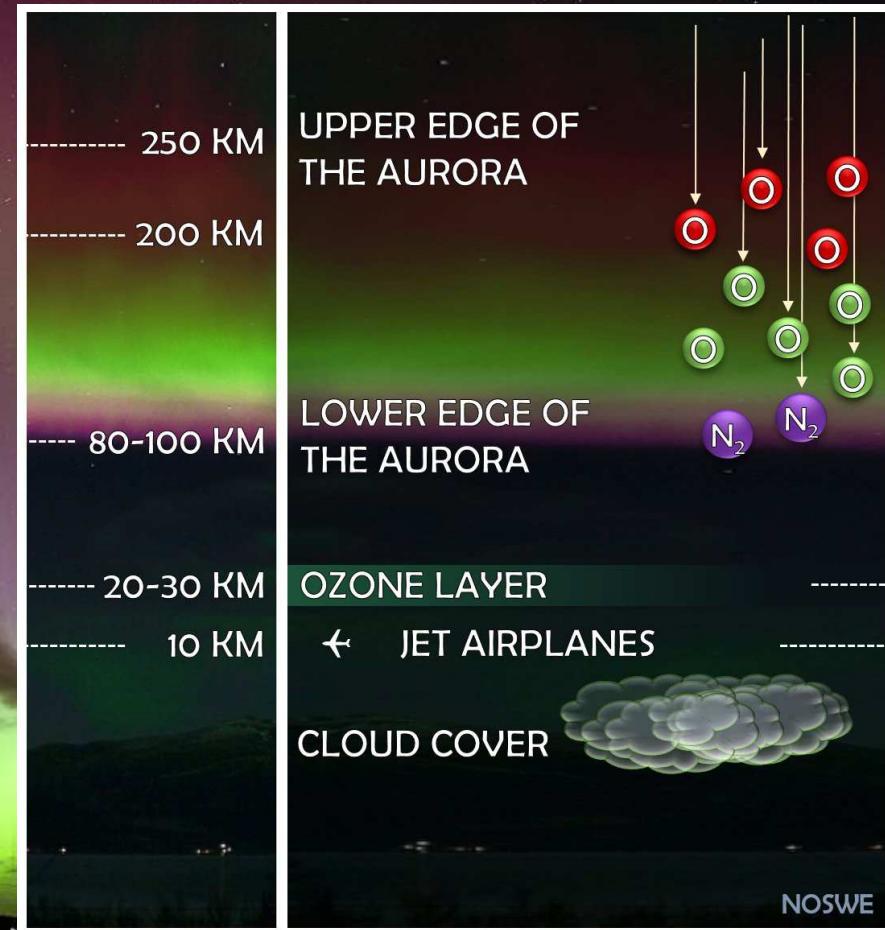
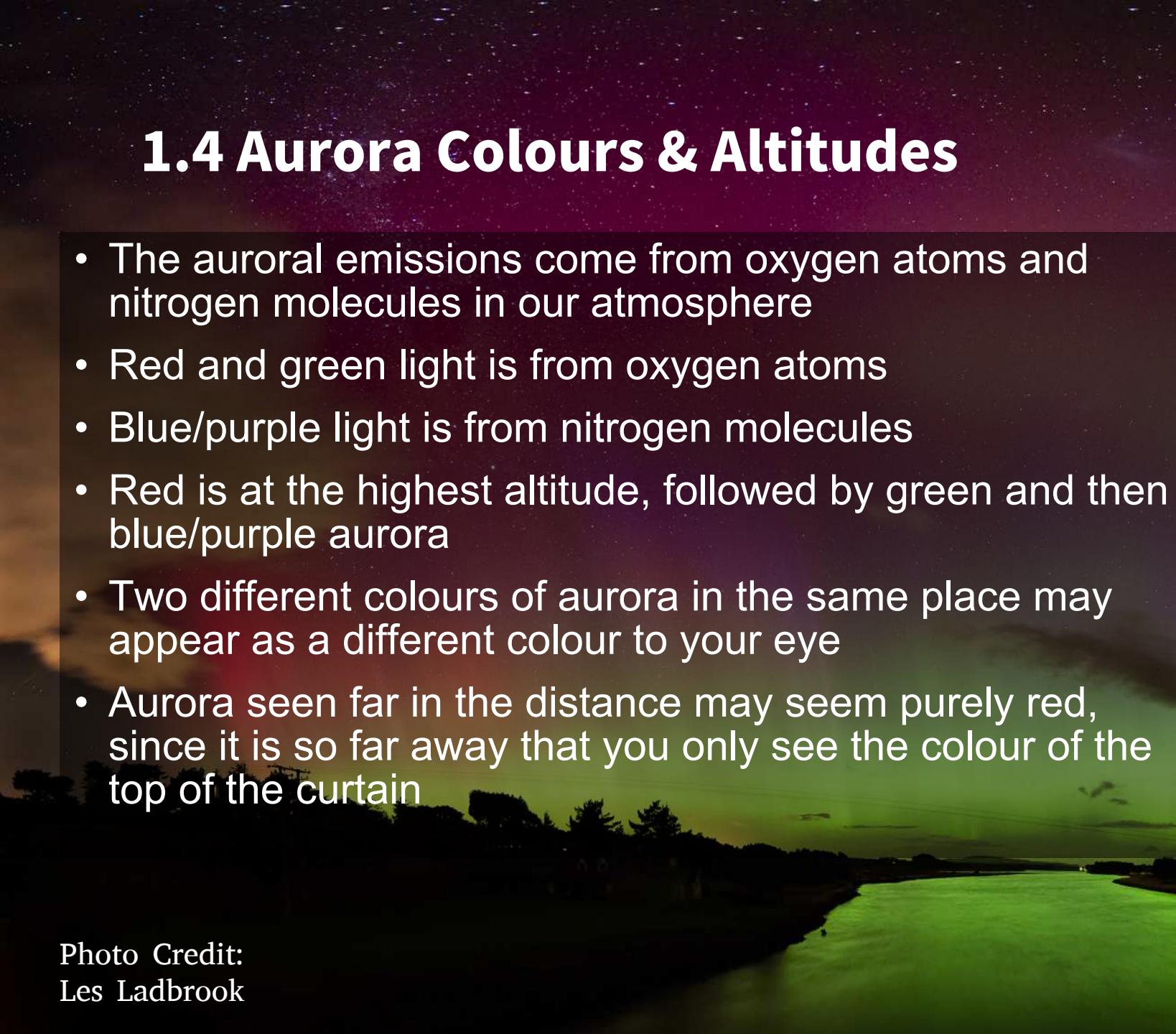
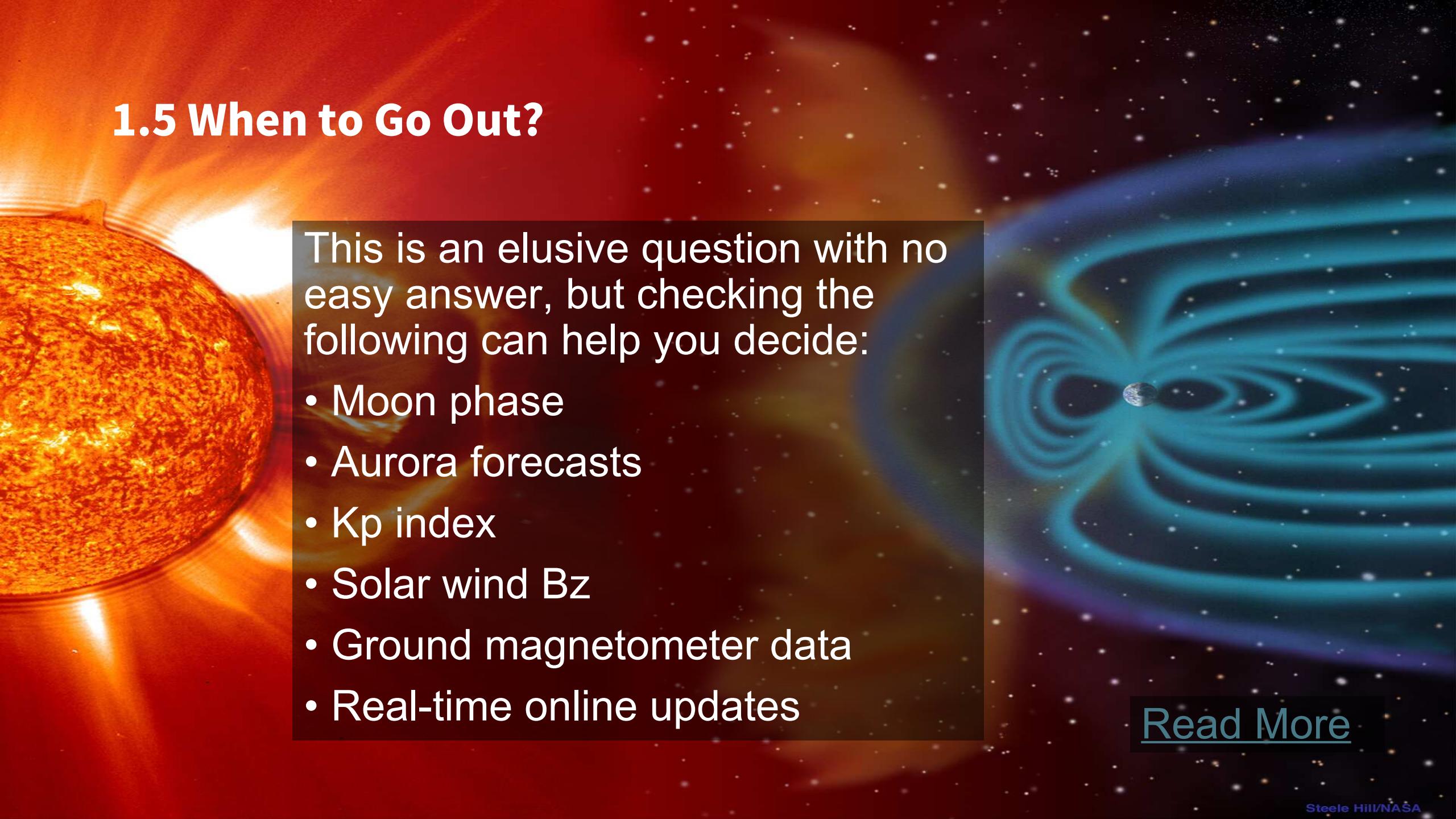


Photo Credit:
Les Ladbrook

[Read More](#)

 Les Ladbrook
PHOTOGRAPHY

1.5 When to Go Out?



This is an elusive question with no easy answer, but checking the following can help you decide:

- Moon phase
- Aurora forecasts
- Kp index
- Solar wind Bz
- Ground magnetometer data
- Real-time online updates

[Read More](#)

1.5 When to Go Out?

A substorm offers prime conditions for aurora viewing, with different types of auroras visible in each of its three phases.

Here's a brief overview with estimated durations:

- 1) **Growth (1 hour)**: e.g. quiet, active and SAR arcs, diffuse/veil, IPA, undulations, RAGDA
- 2) **Expansion (30 min)**: e.g. westward traveling surge, beads, curls, bands, spirals
- 3) **Recovery (1-3 hours)**: e.g. pulsating aurora/patches, STEVE

[Read More](#)

1.6 Taking Photos for Science



Tip: Take a photo of your camera time with your mobile. Then you can figure out the correct time later and your phone will give you a GPS location (if enabled in settings).

Also taking a camera photo of the www.time.is site and saving that with the photos from each observation session is helpful.

To use your photos, scientists need:

- Accurate time + date (universal time)
- GPS location
- What camera and lens were used for the photos
- What settings were used (ISO, aperture, exposure)
- RAW format is best
- Indicate what kind of feature you see and where it is in the photo



[Read More](#)

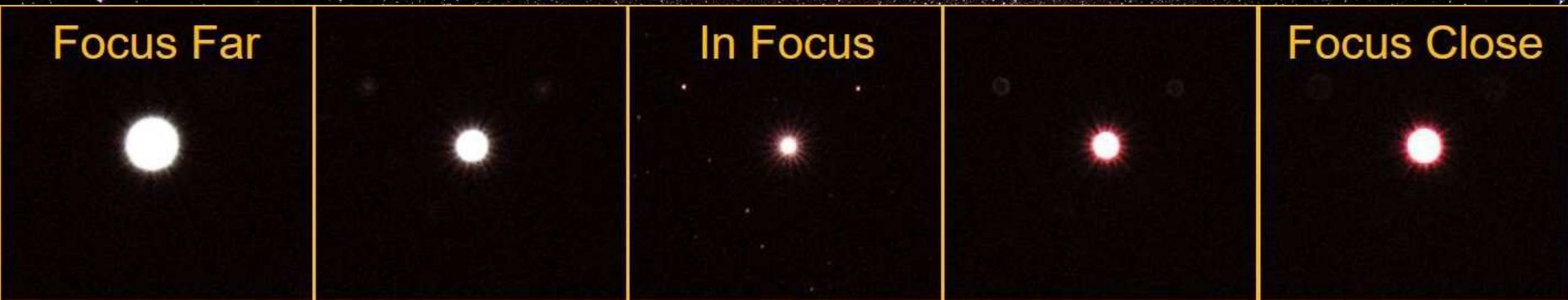
Photo Credit:
Katie Herlingshaw

1.7 Camera Tips: Settings & General

- General settings depend on your camera, but a good starting point for most cameras is ISO 3200, lowest aperture value (lens wide open), and exposure time 5-10 seconds - Adjust the values and see what happens
- Turn on 2 second timer to minimize shaking
- Tape over the timer light
- Wipe your lens regularly if you have condensation or frost

[Read More](#)

1.8 Camera Tips: How to Focus



- Go into manual mode and enable manual focus (MF)
- Move the focus ring to the infinity symbol
- Find a distant bright point of light (e.g. streetlight or star)
- Magnify the image as much as possible
- Move the focus ring back and forward until the point light is smallest
- Check regularly if your camera is still in focus by zooming in on stars in your photos

1.9 Field Checklist: What to Take

- Camera
- Tripod
- Extra batteries
- Extra SD cards
- Headlamp
- Remote shutter
- Wildlife protection/defense
- Microfiber cloth
- Cell phone + booster
- Take a friend or tell someone where you will be.
- Share your location on your cell phone with someone.
- Full tank of fuel
- Reflective clothing
- Food and water
- WINTER – Heat packs, thin gloves, mittens, warm hat, neck warmer, boots and thick socks, sleeping bag

[Read More](#)

2. The Colours of the Aurora



*Donna
Lach*

2.1 Green Aurora



Photo Credit:
Matti Helin

Green aurora occurs between about 100-180 km above the Earth and is caused by glowing oxygen atoms.

2.2 Red Aurora

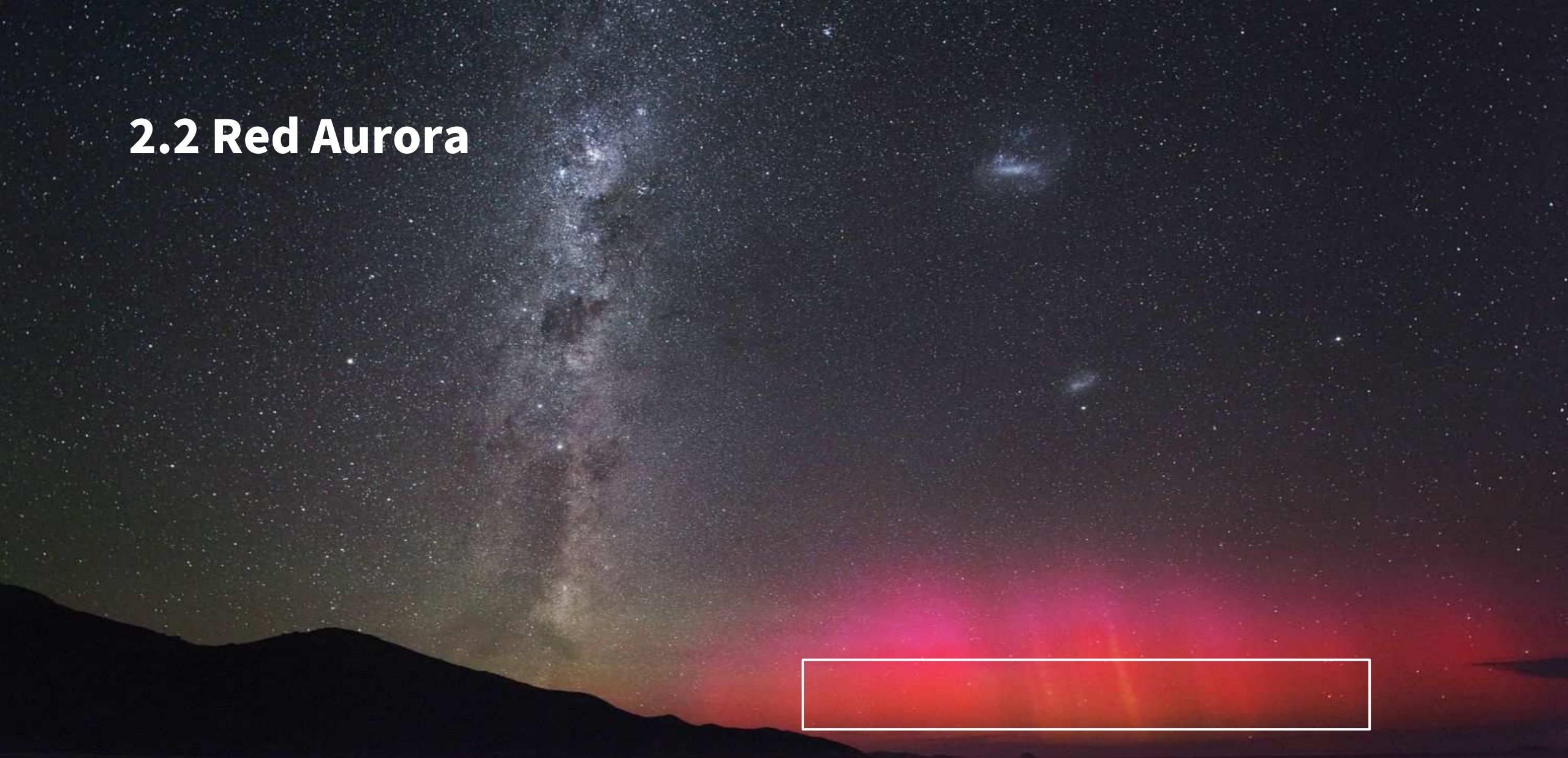
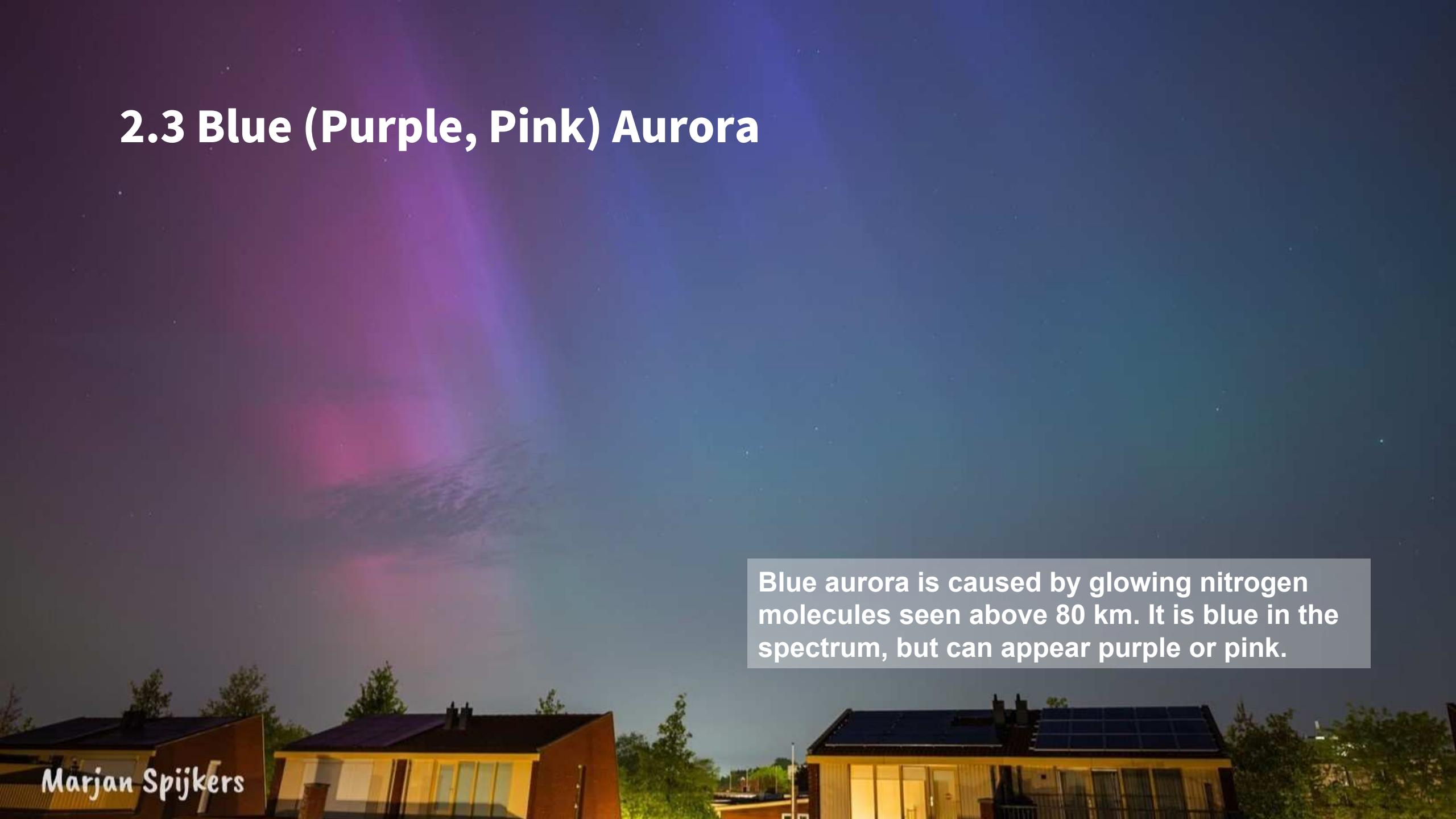


Photo Credit:
Colin Legg

Red aurora occurs above about 150 km and is caused by glowing oxygen atoms. It can be created with less energy than green aurora and happens higher up.

2.3 Blue (Purple, Pink) Aurora



Blue aurora is caused by glowing nitrogen molecules seen above 80 km. It is blue in the spectrum, but can appear purple or pink.

2.3 Blue (Purple, Pink) Aurora



© Maxime Grandin

The pink fringe that occurs at an altitude of about 80-100 km during intense aurora is also spectrum blue and caused by glowing nitrogen.



2.4 Sunlit Top



The sunlit top occurs just after sunset or before sunrise. Nitrogen molecules have been transported higher up in altitude and emit a blue color when the sun illuminates them.

2.4 Sunlit Top

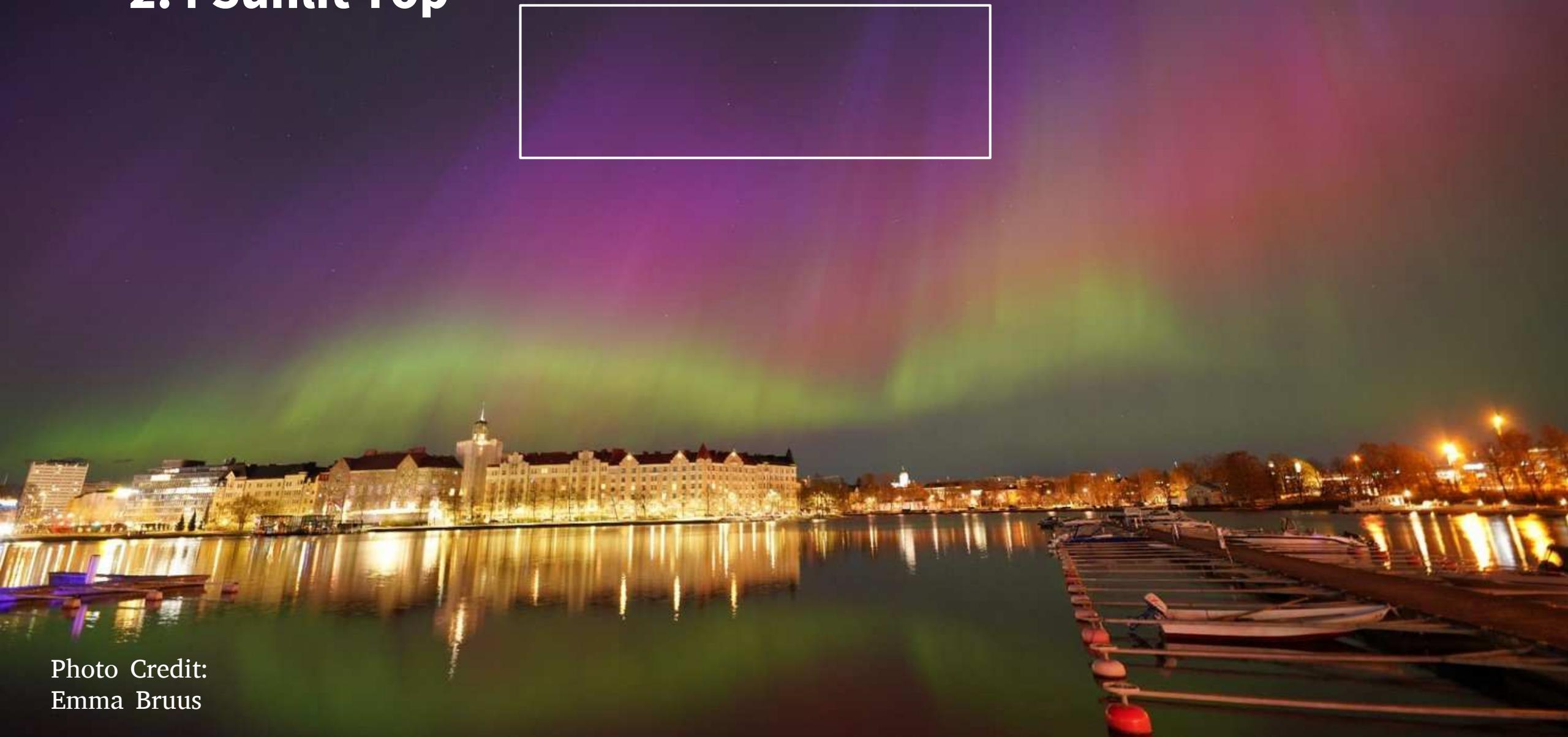


Photo Credit:
Emma Bruus

2.5 Black Aurora



2.5 Black Aurora



2.6 Great Red Aurora

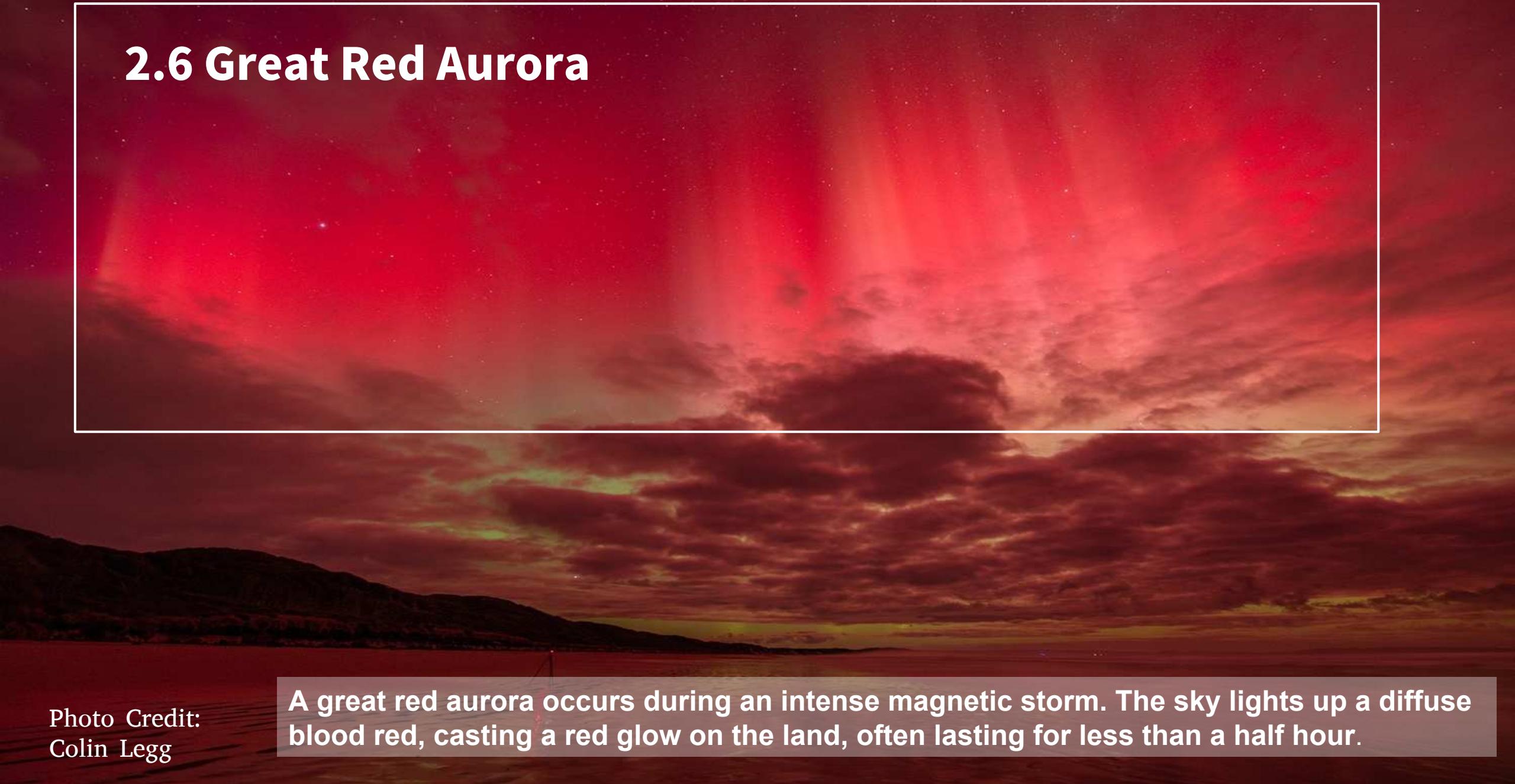


Photo Credit:
Colin Legg

A great red aurora occurs during an intense magnetic storm. The sky lights up a diffuse blood red, casting a red glow on the land, often lasting for less than a half hour.

2.7 Dayside Aurora



Dayside aurora is viewed in the polar regions in places where it can be dark during the daytime hours. It is usually more red than green since the particles that cause it have less energy than those causing nighttime aurora.

Photo Credit:
Mikko Syrjäsu

3. Discrete Aurora



Lee Lafford
PHOTOGRAPHY

3.1 Quiet Arc



Photo Credit:
Minna Glad

A quiet arc is a single straight ribbon with a sharp lower edge.

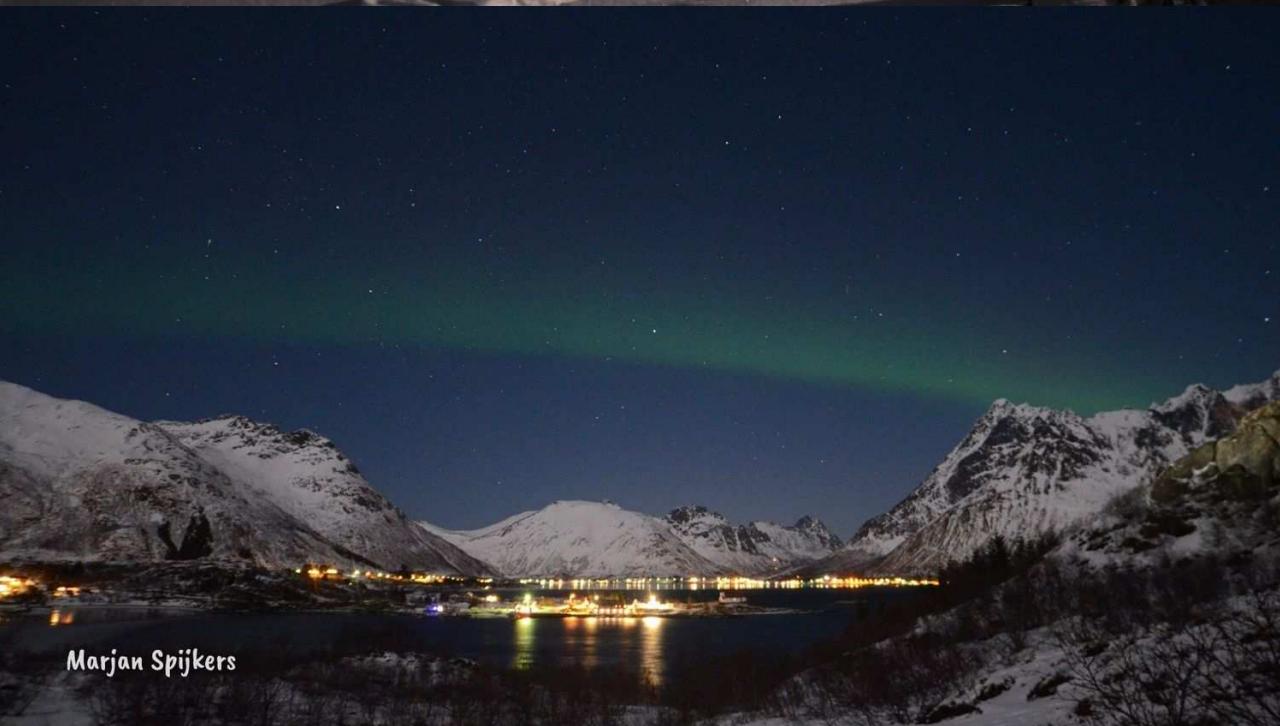
3.1 Quiet Arc



Photo Credit: Minna Glad



© Minna Glad



Marjan Spijkers

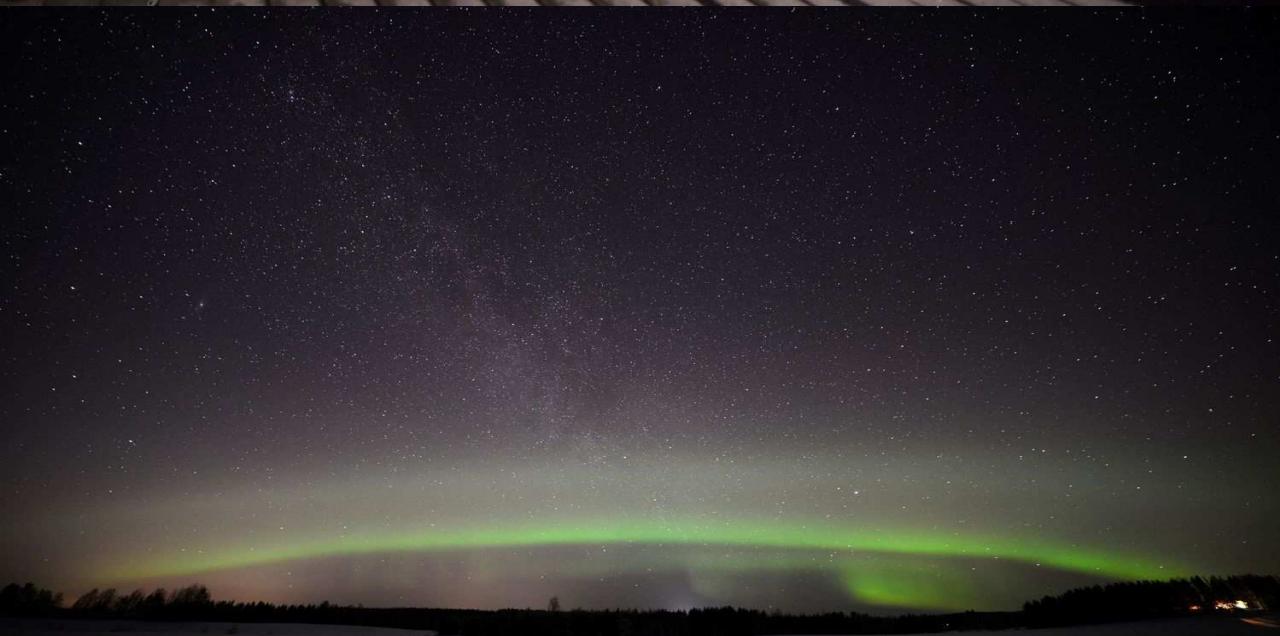


Photo Credit: Eero Karvinen

3.2 Active Arc



Photo Credit:
Vincent Ledvina

An active arc is a restless long ribbon with a sharp lower edge. When you are directly under the aurora oval, you may see several ribbons running parallel.

3.2 Active Arc



Photo Credit:
Eero Karvinen

Active arcs often have some kind
of structuring inside of the arc.

3.3 Rays, “Pillars”



A ray or a pillar is a bright vertical streak that follows the magnetic field line.

Lee Lafford
PHOTOGRAPHY

3.3 Rays, “Pillars”

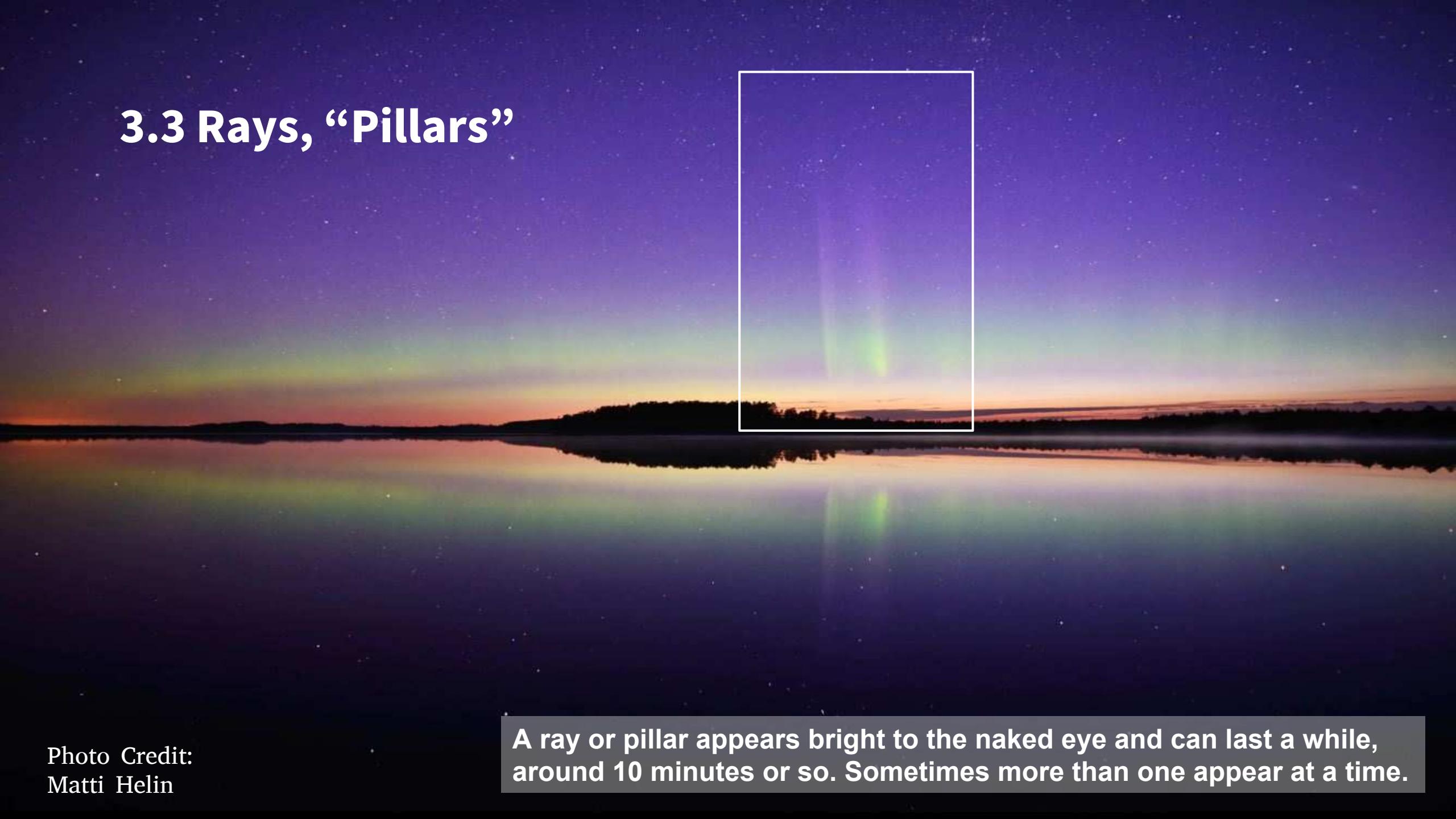


Photo Credit:
Matti Helin

A ray or pillar appears bright to the naked eye and can last a while, around 10 minutes or so. Sometimes more than one appear at a time.

3.4 Rayed Arc, “Curtain”



Photo Credit:
Eero Karvinen

A rayed arc is a tall auroral structure with a long series of rays that stretch up the magnetic field line across the arc.

3.4 Rayed Arc, “Curtain”



Photo Credit:
Matti Helin



Photo Credit: Colin Legg



Photo Credit: Eero Karvinen

3.5 Bands

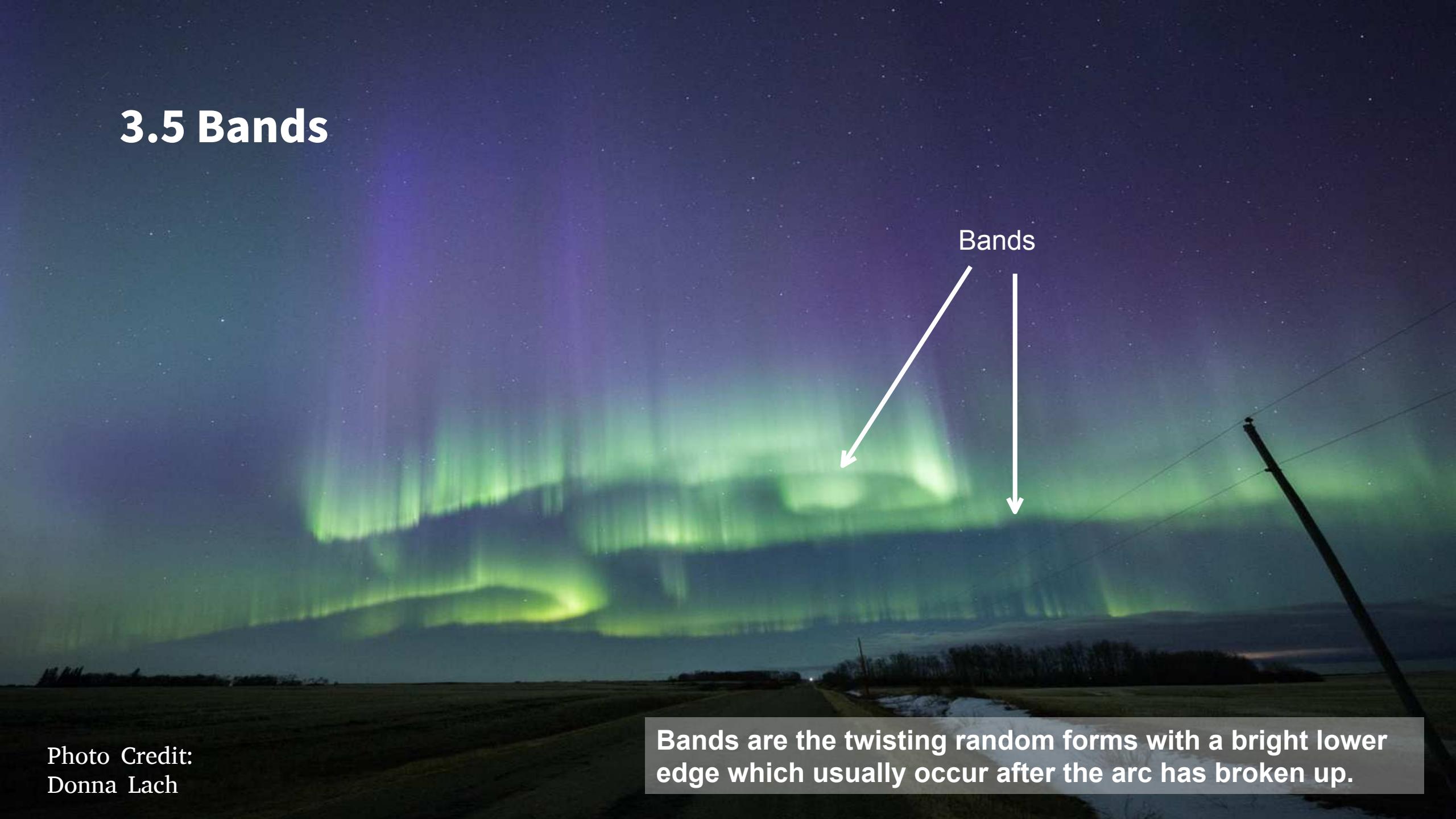


Photo Credit:
Donna Lach

Bands are the twisting random forms with a bright lower edge which usually occur after the arc has broken up.

3.5 Bands

Marjan Spijkers

© Maxime Grandin



Photo Credit:
Eero Karvinen

© Minna Glad

3.6 Beads



Beads are evenly spaced bright features in the auroral arc that occur just prior to substorm onset.

3.6 Beads

Douglas Lach



© Minna Glad

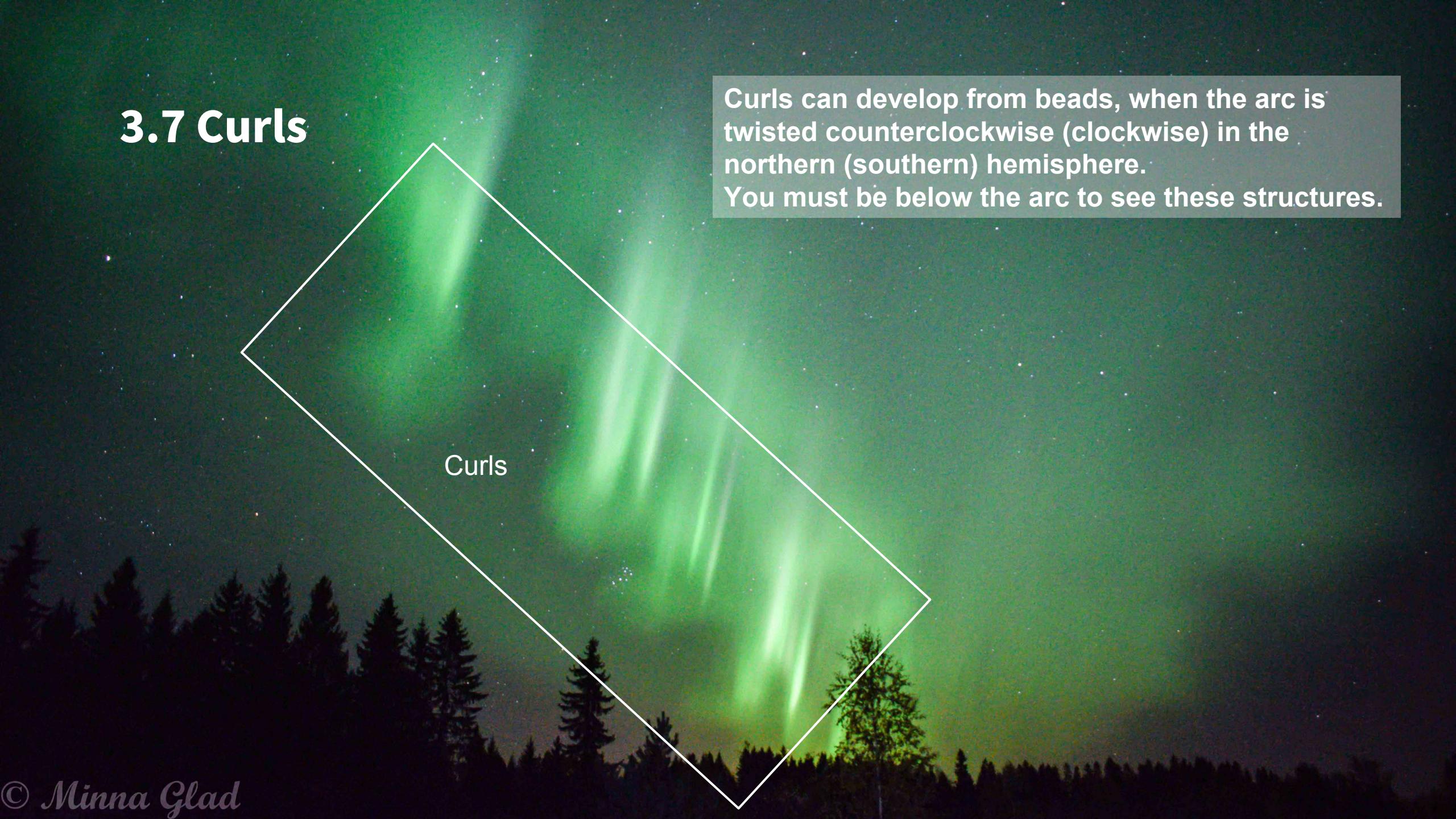


Photo Credit: Matti Helin



Douglas Lach

3.7 Curls



Curls can develop from beads, when the arc is twisted counterclockwise (clockwise) in the northern (southern) hemisphere.
You must be below the arc to see these structures.

Curls

3.8 Folds



Folds are loops that develop from a straight arc. These are bigger than curls.



3.9 Spiral, “Cinnamon Roll”

Photo Credit:
Vincent Ledvina

A spiral is a vortex shape that can develop from folds. Viewed up in the northern (southern) hemisphere spirals wind (counter) clockwise. This is the opposite direction to curls. Spirals often occur in periodic chains.

3.9 Spiral



© Minna Glad



© Maxime Grandin

A “chain of spirals” or Vortex Street is when more than one appears along an auroral band in a series.



Donna Lach

3.10 Corona

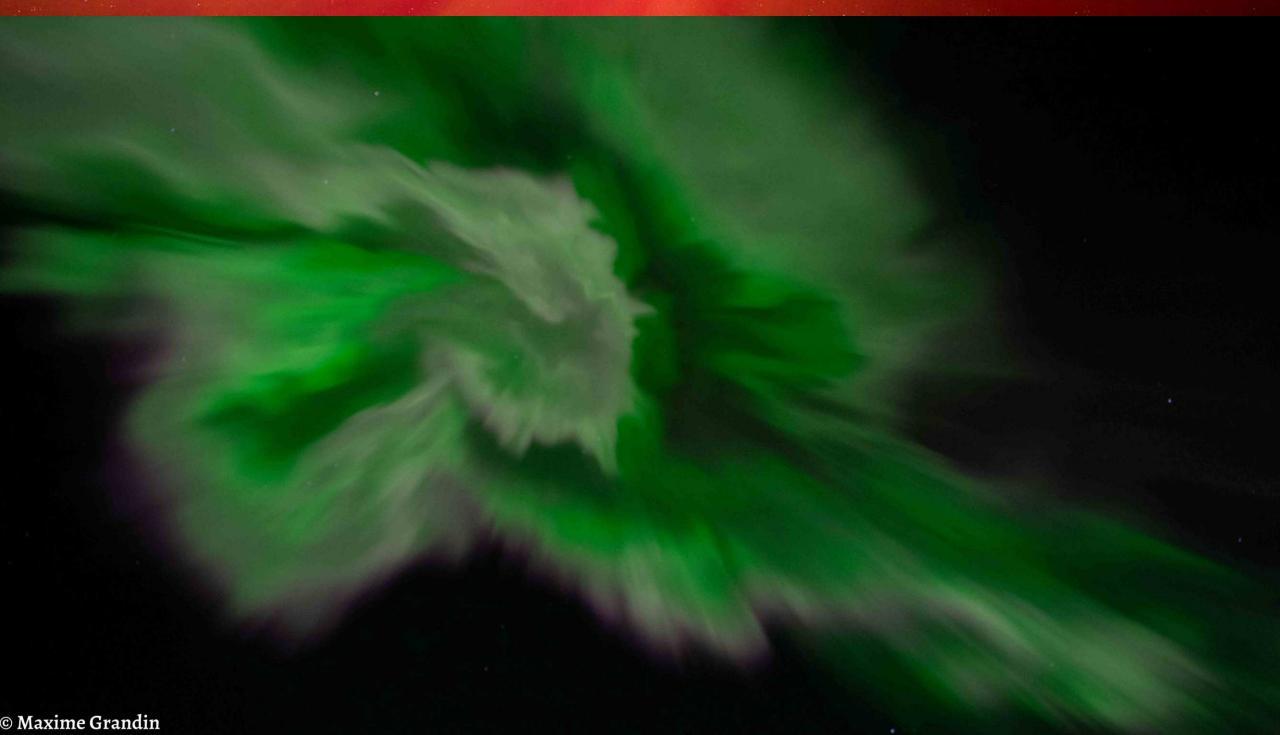


A corona is the appearance of a crown above you during intense aurora, directly overhead.

3.10 Corona



L.Glad
Photography



Dominique
Lalonde



3.11 Westward Traveling Surge



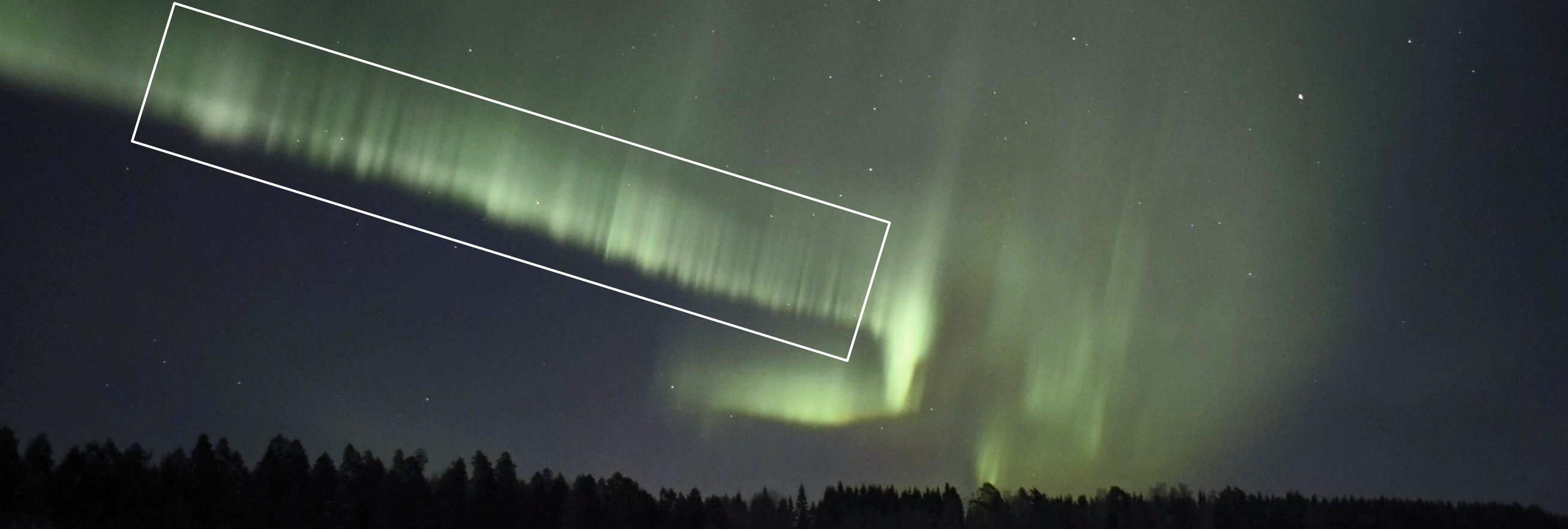
A westward traveling surge occurs at substorm onset, and is seen as a bulge in the arc on the poleward side, like a whip.

3.11 Westward Traveling Surge



Photo Credit:
Dave Knudsen

3.12 Enhanced Aurora



Enhanced aurora is a particularly thick and well-defined lower edge of the aurora band that sometimes occurs during substorm onset.

3.12 Enhanced Aurora



Donna
Lach

4. Diffuse Aurora

A wide-angle photograph of a diffuse aurora over a rural landscape. The sky is dark blue at the top, transitioning into a bright green glow from the horizon upwards. The green light is most intense in the center and fades towards the edges. In the foreground, there's a dark, flat field with some low-lying vegetation. A single road or path leads into the distance, lined with a few small, isolated trees. The overall atmosphere is serene and captures the beauty of a natural light display.

4.1 Diffuse, “Veil”



Diffuse aurora is featureless without any clear structures, also known as “Veil” aurora.

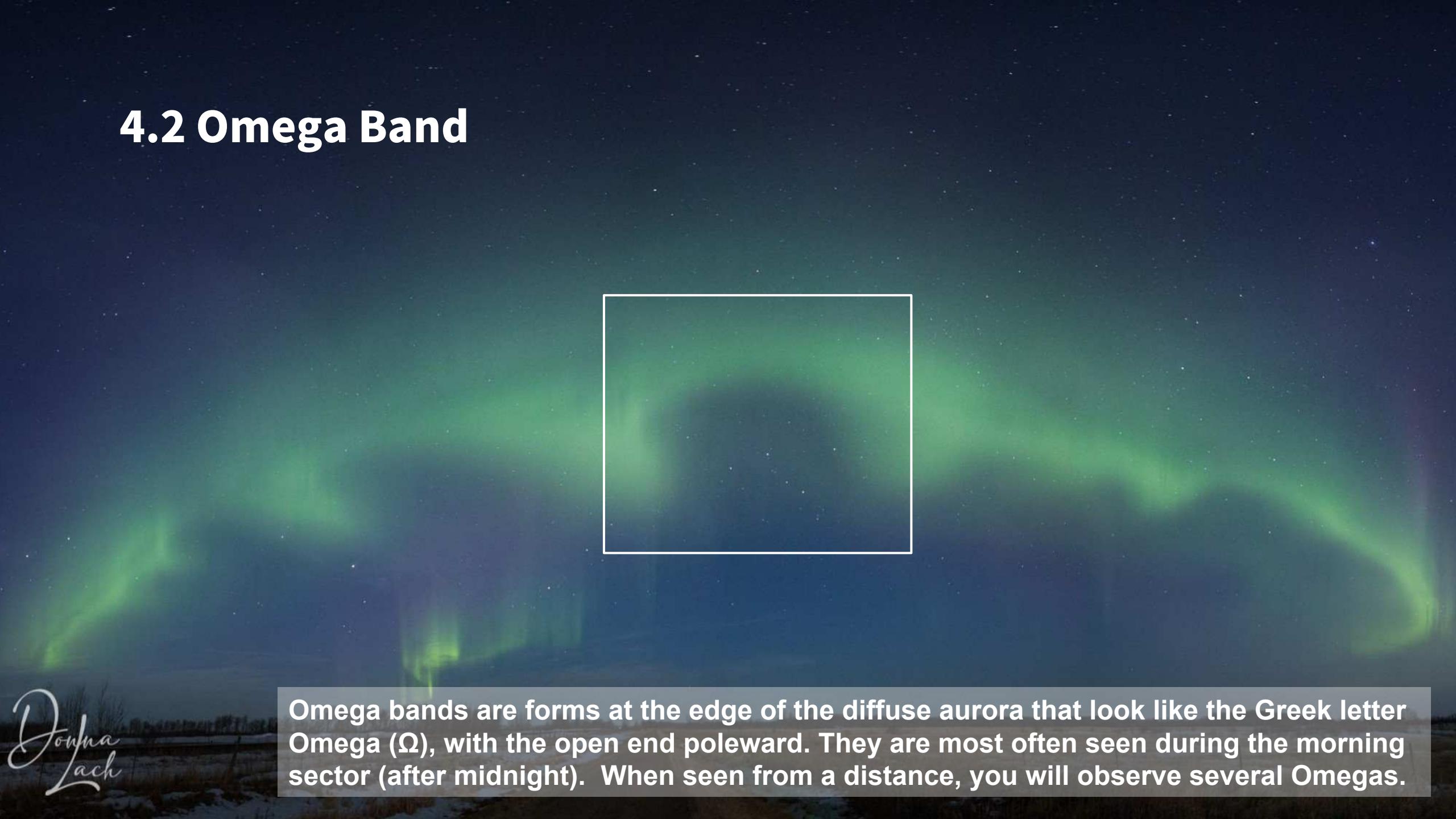
4.1 Diffuse, “Veil”



Photo Credit:
Matti Helin

© Maxime Grandin

4.2 Omega Band



Omega bands are forms at the edge of the diffuse aurora that look like the Greek letter Omega (Ω), with the open end poleward. They are most often seen during the morning sector (after midnight). When seen from a distance, you will observe several Omegas.

4.2 Omega Band



Douglas Lach



Douglas Lach



Douglas Lach



Douglas Lach

4.3 Pulsating Aurora/Patches



*Donna
Lach*

Pulsating aurora is irregular shapes of diffuse aurora that turn dim and bright. It occurs after substorm onset, during the recovery phase. A long exposure can reveal much more colour.

4.3 Pulsating Aurora/Patches



1



2

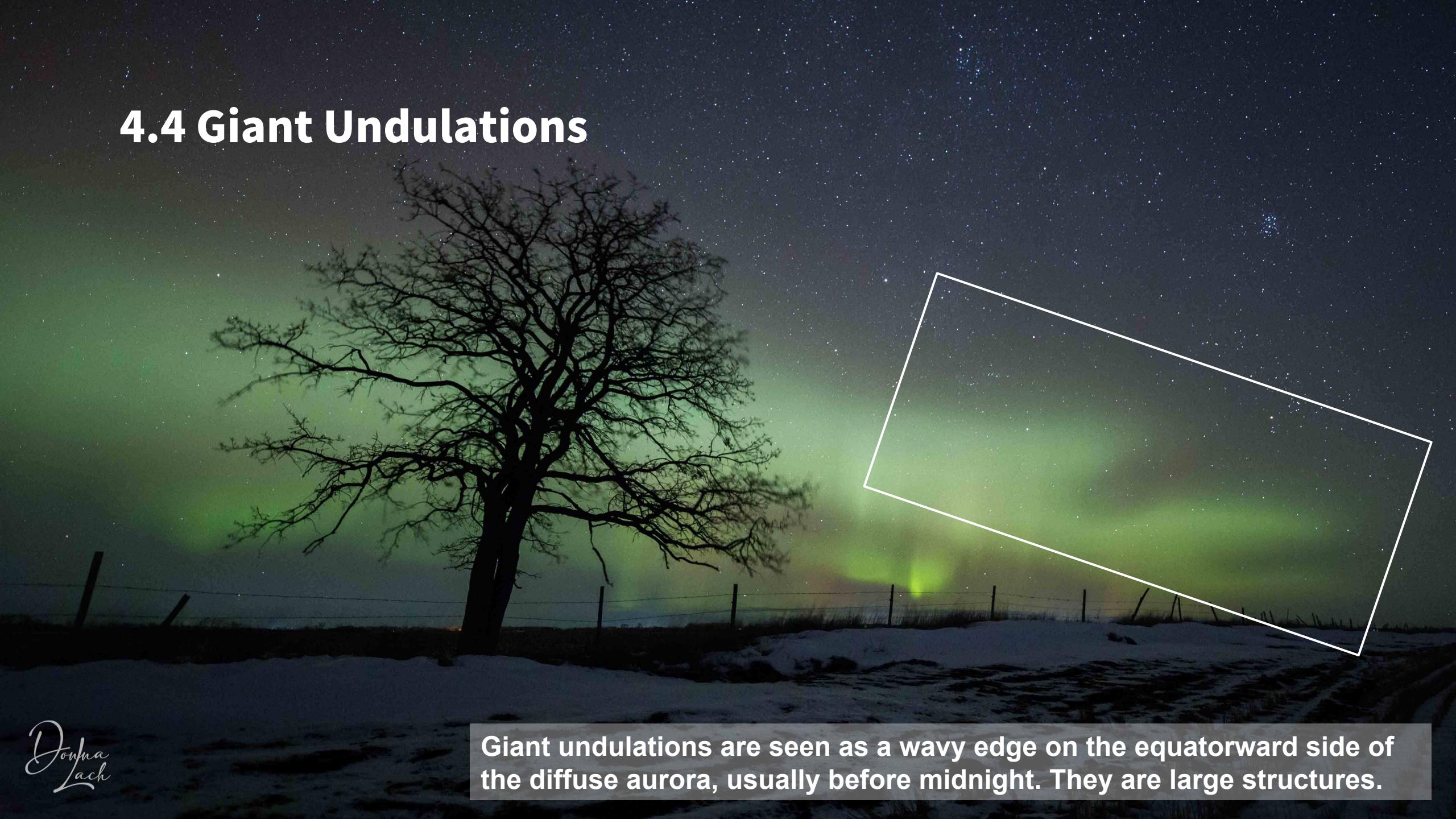


3



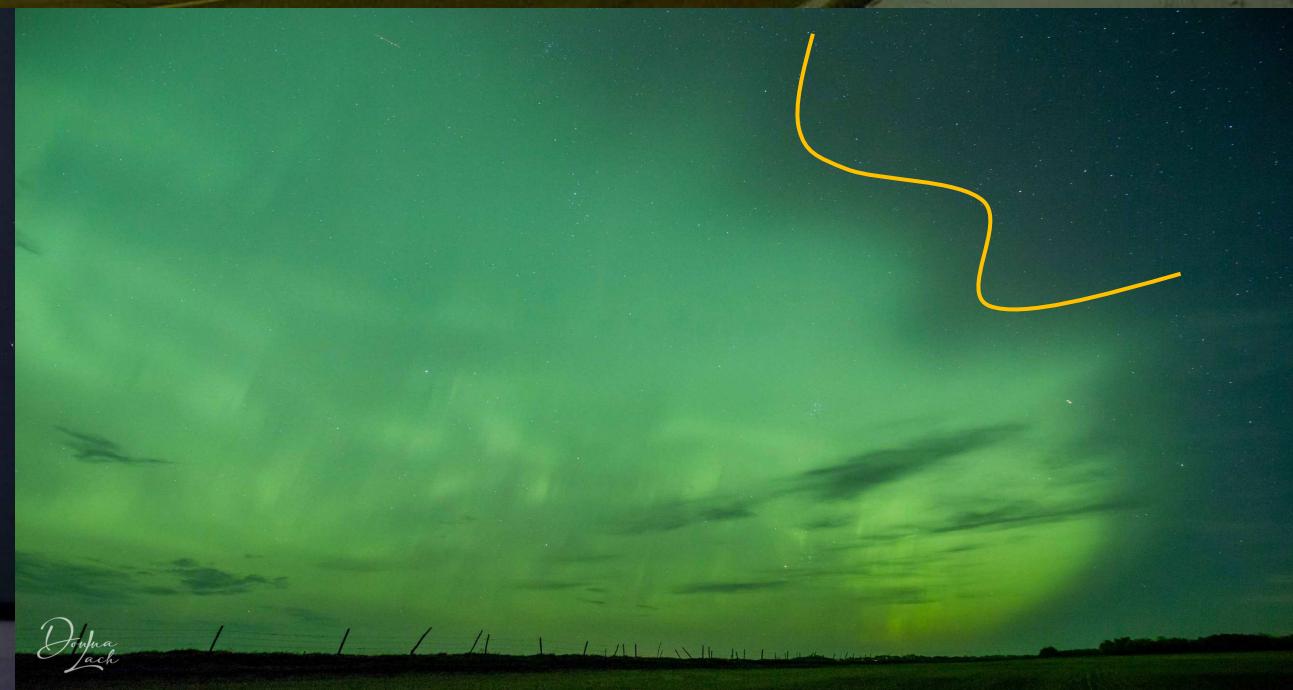
4

4.4 Giant Undulations

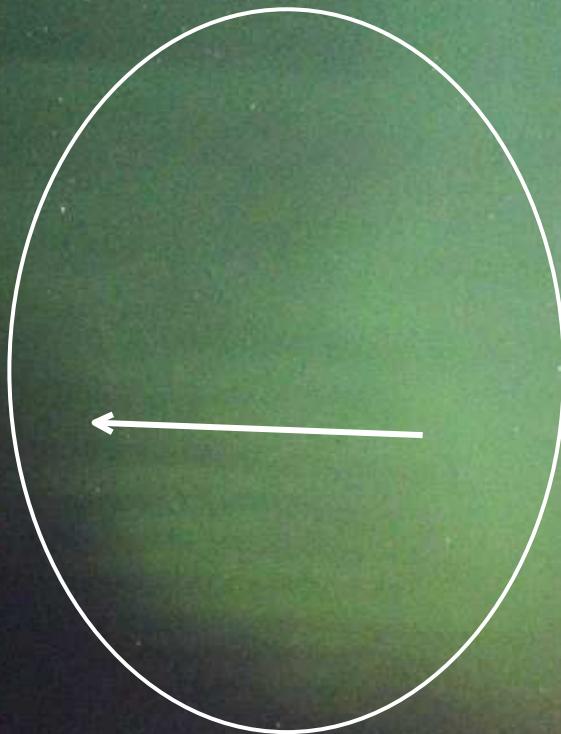


Giant undulations are seen as a wavy edge on the equatorward side of the diffuse aurora, usually before midnight. They are large structures.

4.4 Giant Undulations



4.5 Dunes



[Read More](#)

Dunes are finger-like stripes in the diffuse aurora. If you watch dunes over time, the diffuse aurora seems to flow like water over them.

4.5 Dunes

Photo Credit:
Colin Legg



Photo Credit:
Matti Helin

4.6 Isolated Proton Aurora (IPA)



IPA blobs or arcs appear on the equatorward side of the main aurora and are usually green.

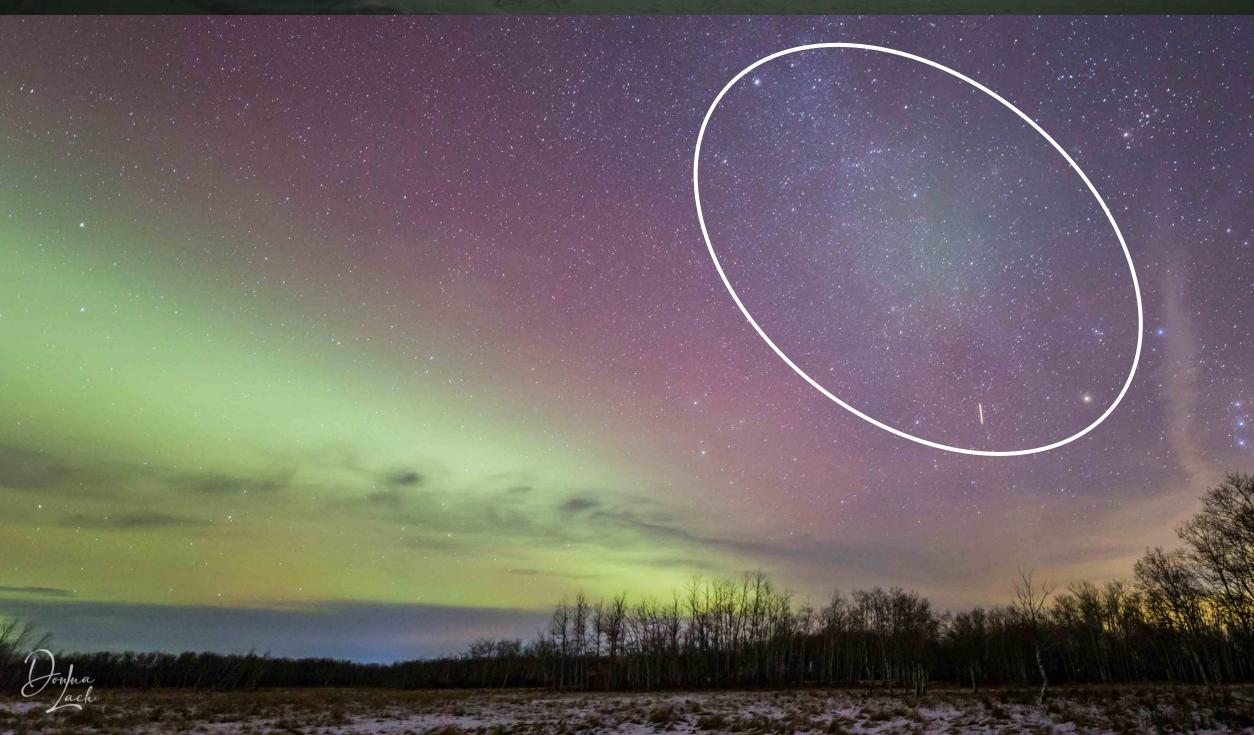
4.6 IPA



Photo Credit:
Eero Karvinen



Photo Credit:
Eero Karvinen



4.7 Continuum



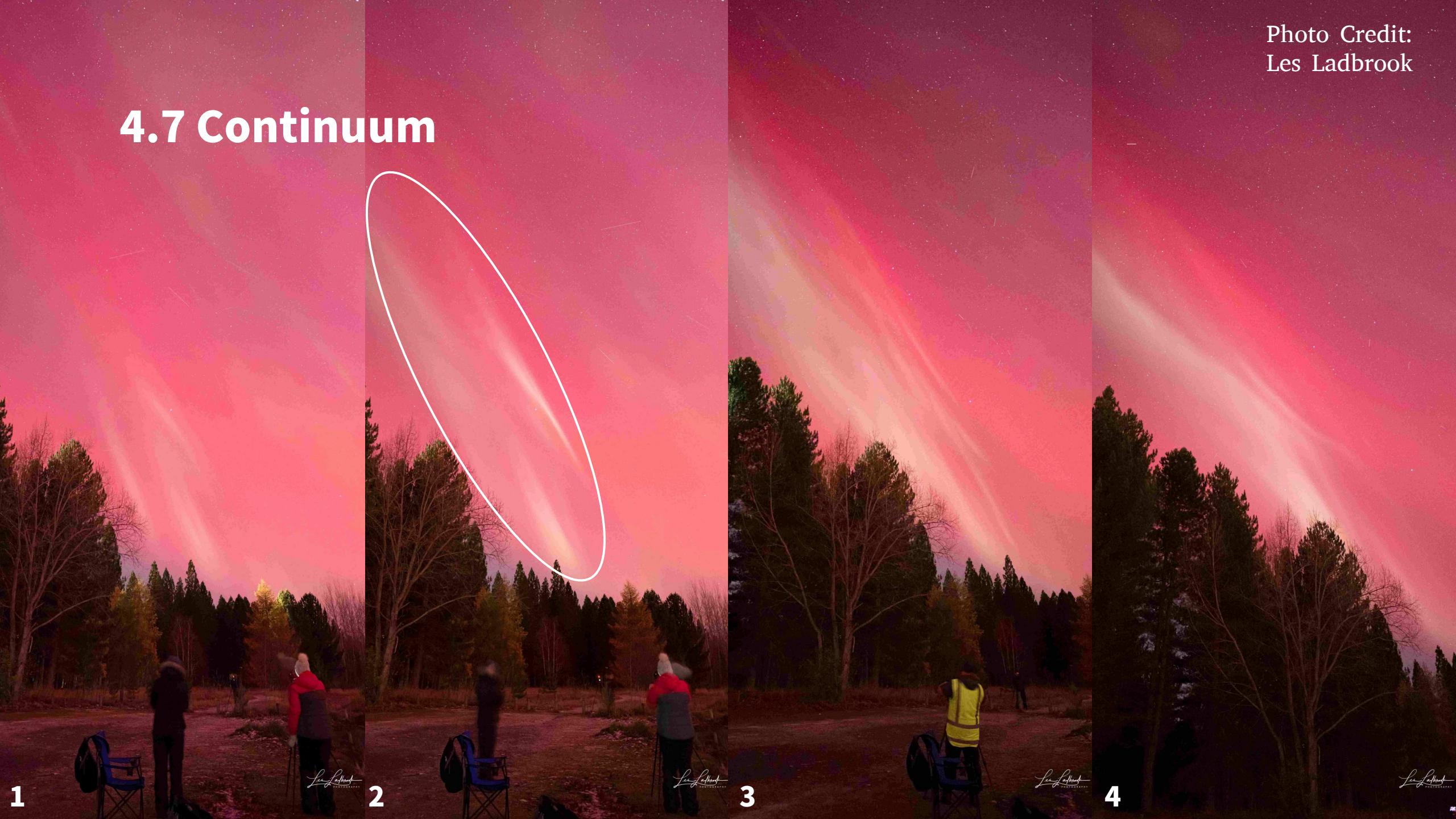
[Read More](#)

Marjan Spijkers

A continuum looks almost white to the eye, but is actually made up of all the different colours that combine together to create the off-white appearance.

Photo Credit:
Les Ladbrook

4.7 Continuum



1

2

3

4

Les Ladbrook
PHOTOGRAPHY

4.8 Fragments

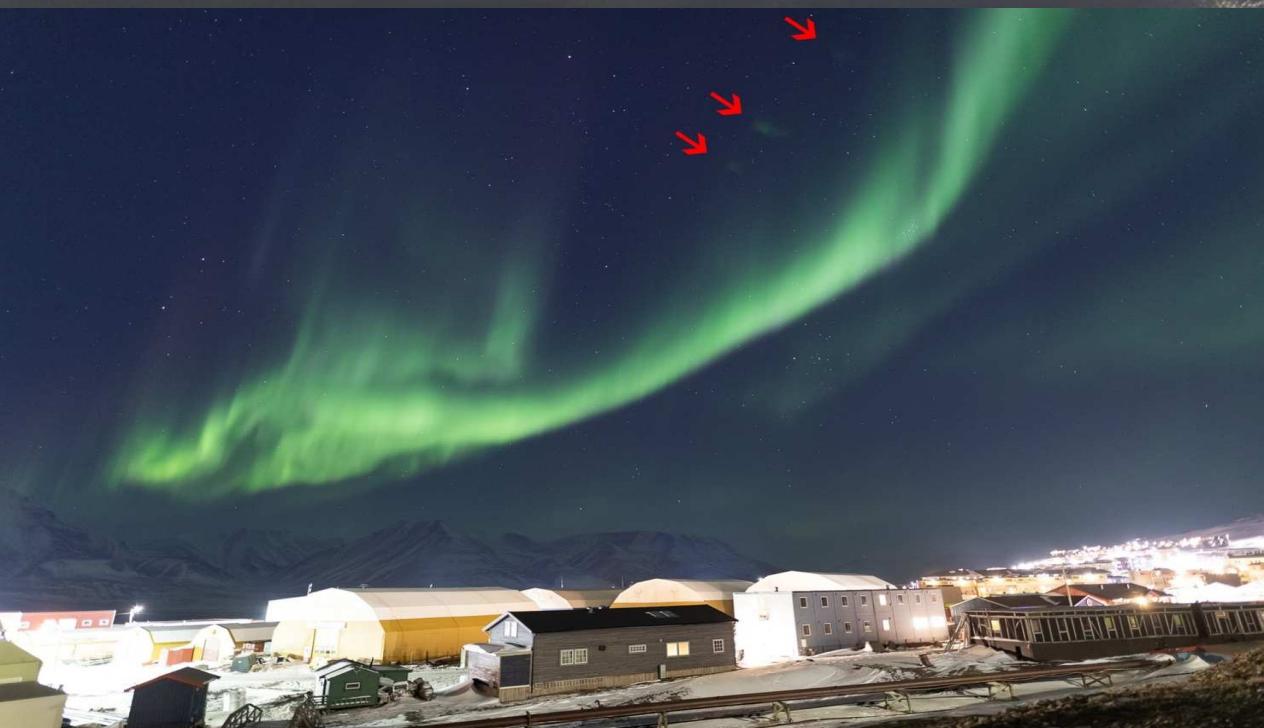


Fragments are similar to streaks, and are most often seen on the poleward side of the oval. Their orientation is perpendicular to the magnetic field direction.

[Read More](#)

Photo Credit:
Sophie Cordon

4.8 Fragments



5. Sub-Auroral Optical Emissions

© John Andersen 2023

Sub-auroral means the region equatorward of the auroral oval.

5.1 STEVE (Strong Thermal Emission Velocity Enhancement)



STEVE is a purple ribbon that can remain in the sky for about an hour.

[Read More](#)

5.1 STEVE

Donna Lach



Donna
Lach

Donna
Lach

5.2 Picket Fence, “Pickets”



The Picket Fence is the series of vertical bright green stripes adjacent to or below STEVE that are lined up with the magnetic field.

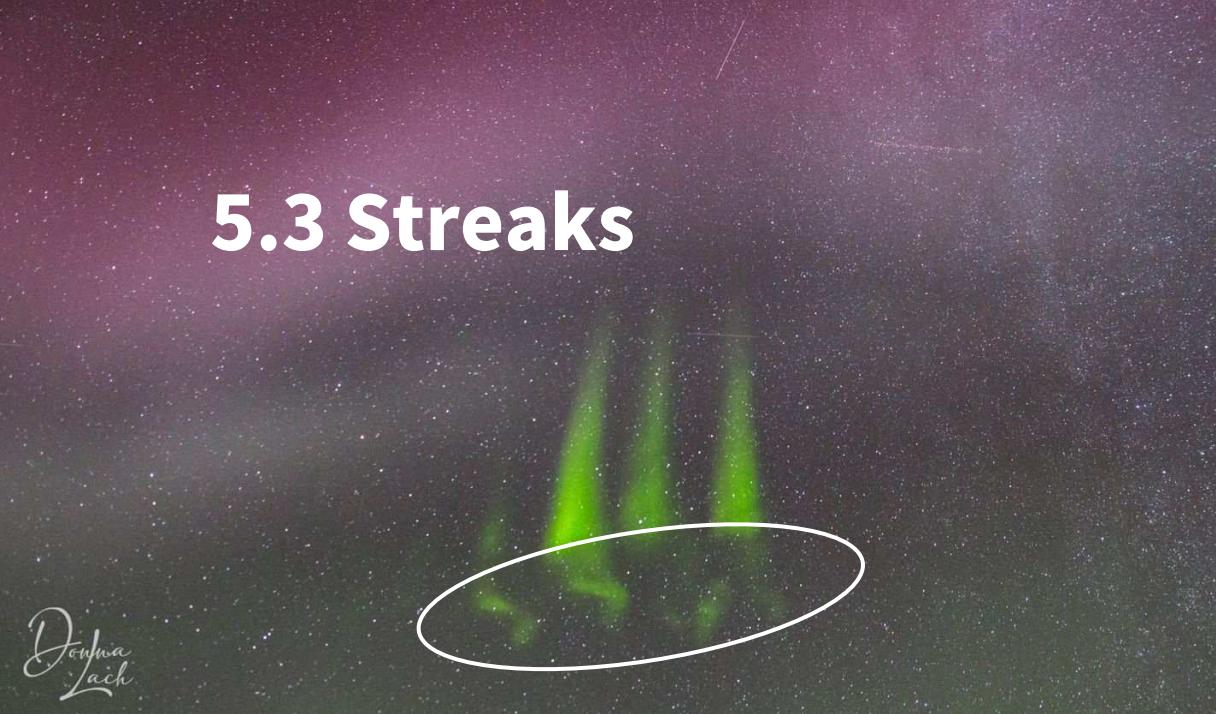
5.3 Streaks



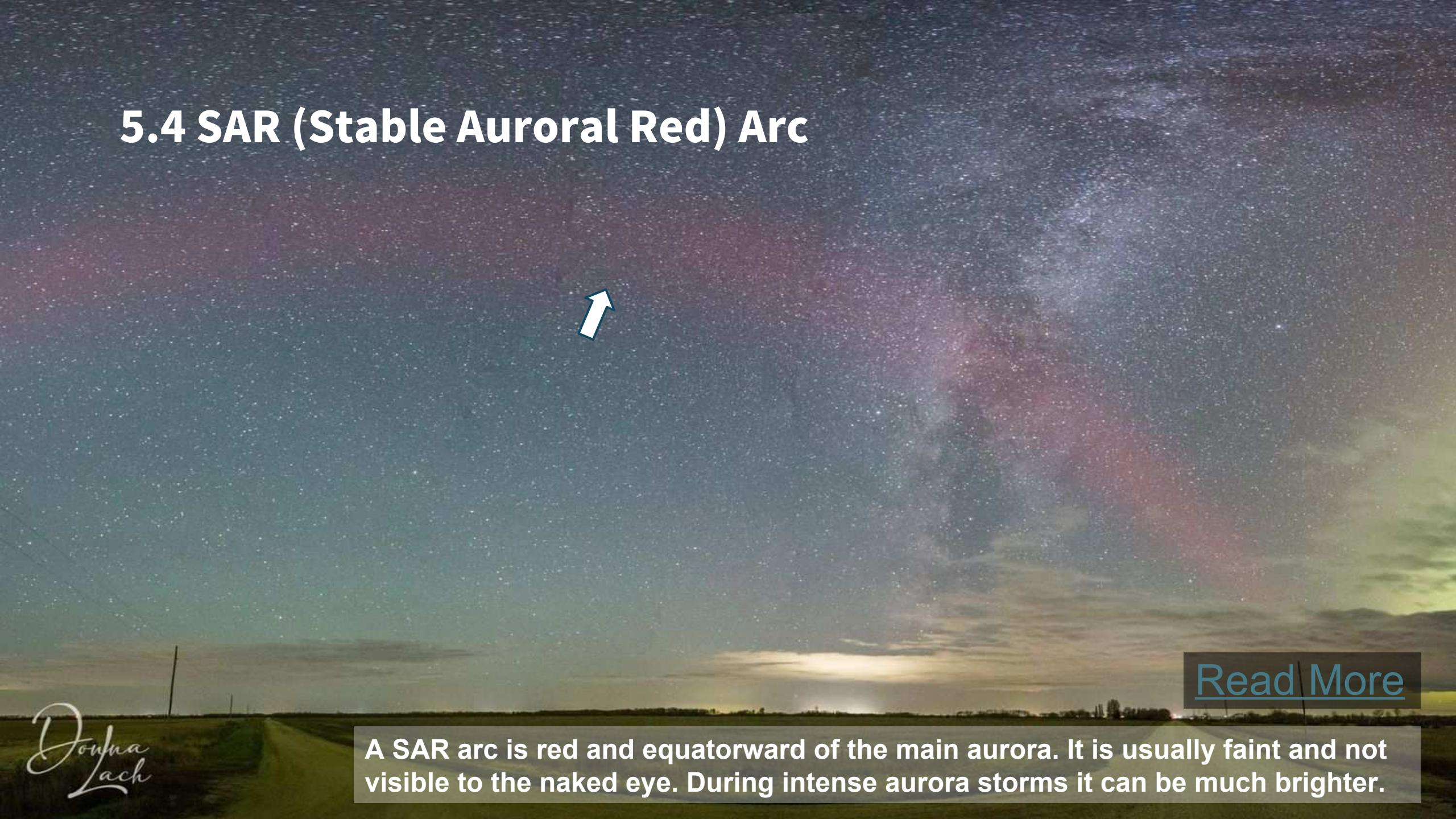
Photo Credit:
John Andersen

Streaks are the horizontal green patches below the STEVE's pickets, and are perpendicular to the magnetic field direction.

5.3 Streaks



5.4 SAR (Stable Auroral Red) Arc



[Read More](#)

A SAR arc is red and equatorward of the main aurora. It is usually faint and not visible to the naked eye. During intense aurora storms it can be much brighter.

Douma
Lach

5.4 SAR Arc



Photo Credit:
Matti Helin

Photo Credit:
Les Ladbrook

Les Ladbrook
PHOTOGRAPHY

5.5 RAGDA (Red Arc with Green Diffuse Aurora)

RAGDA (Red Arc with Green Diffuse Aurora) is a 2-colour combination of diffuse aurora with a long lifetime.

[Read More](#)

Green Diffuse Aurora

Red Arc

Photo Credit:
Donna Lach

5.5 RAGDA



Red Arc

Green Diffuse Aurora

5.6 SAMPS (Sub Auroral Morning Proton Spots)

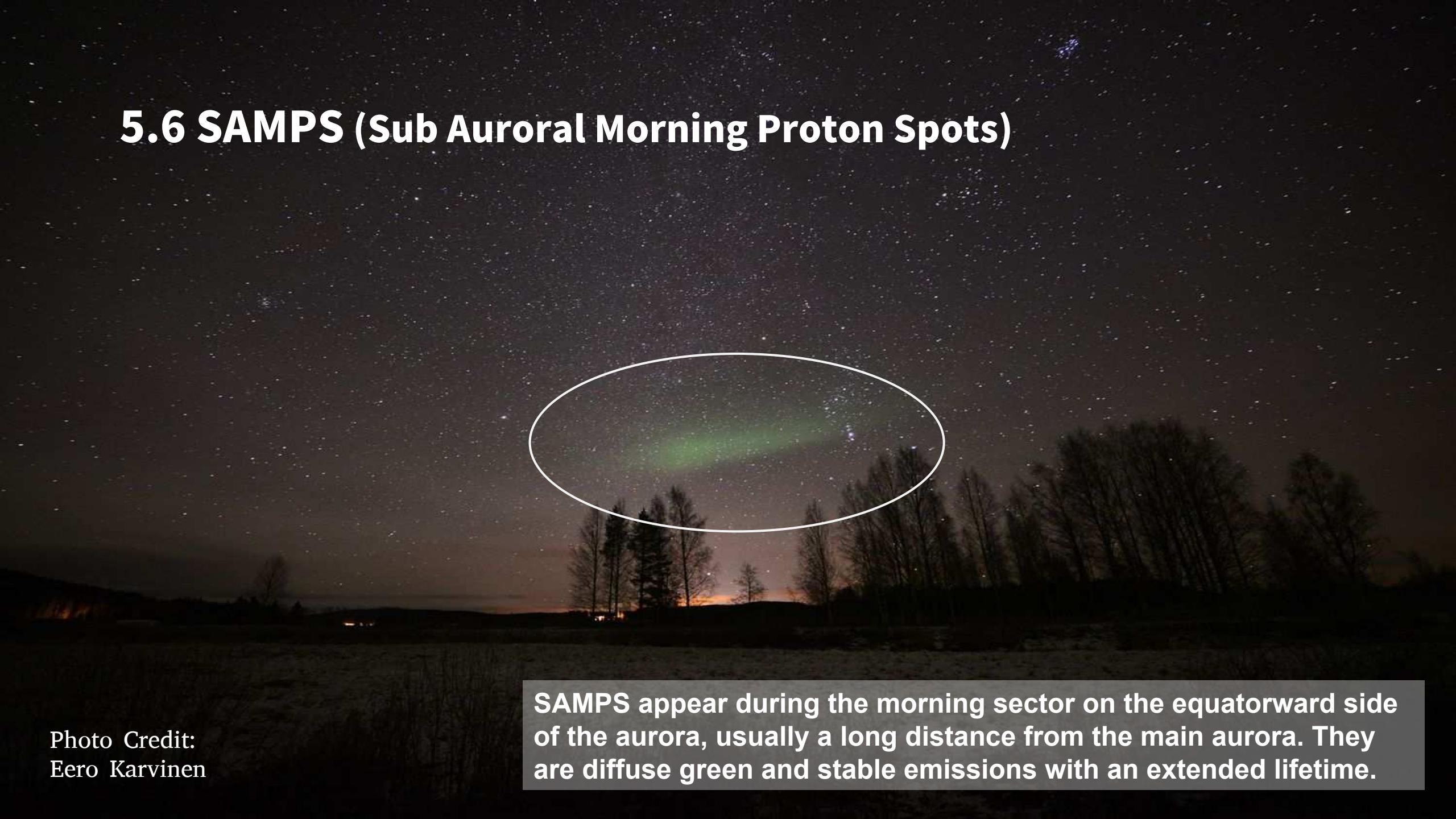


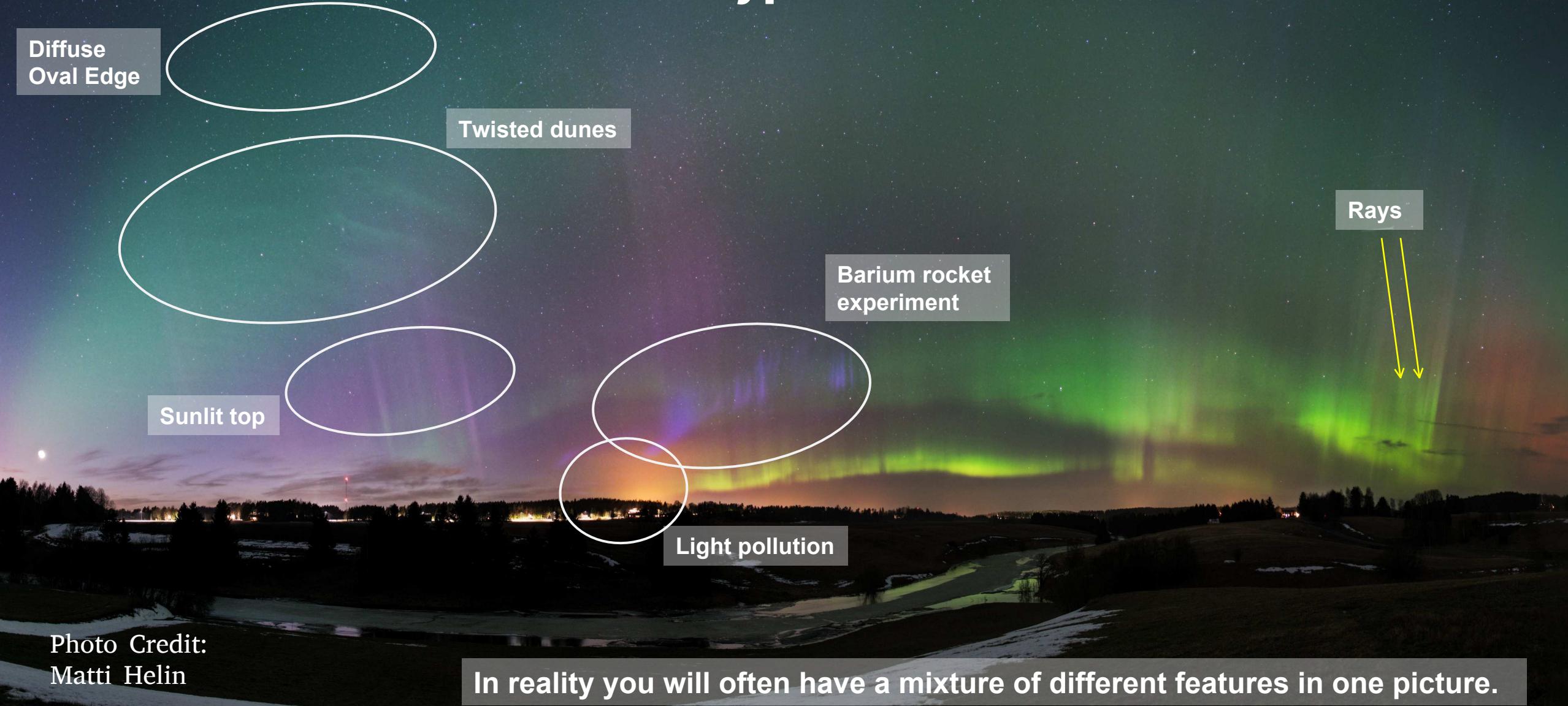
Photo Credit:
Eero Karvinen

SAMPS appear during the morning sector on the equatorward side of the aurora, usually a long distance from the main aurora. They are diffuse green and stable emissions with an extended lifetime.

6. The Reality of Observations

- What you see on your camera will look different to what you see with your eyes! Your eyes are not as sensitive at seeing the colours in darkness as the camera and the white balance setting on the camera can change the apparent colour in the image.
- What you observe will vary depending on your geomagnetic latitude (polar, auroral, sub-auroral, and low latitude). For example, at low latitudes you seldom see the green as it is below your horizon. However, you will see the sub-auroral features more often.
- We hope our guide will help you figure out what aurora you saw, but often in reality the aurora can be complicated with a mixture of types.

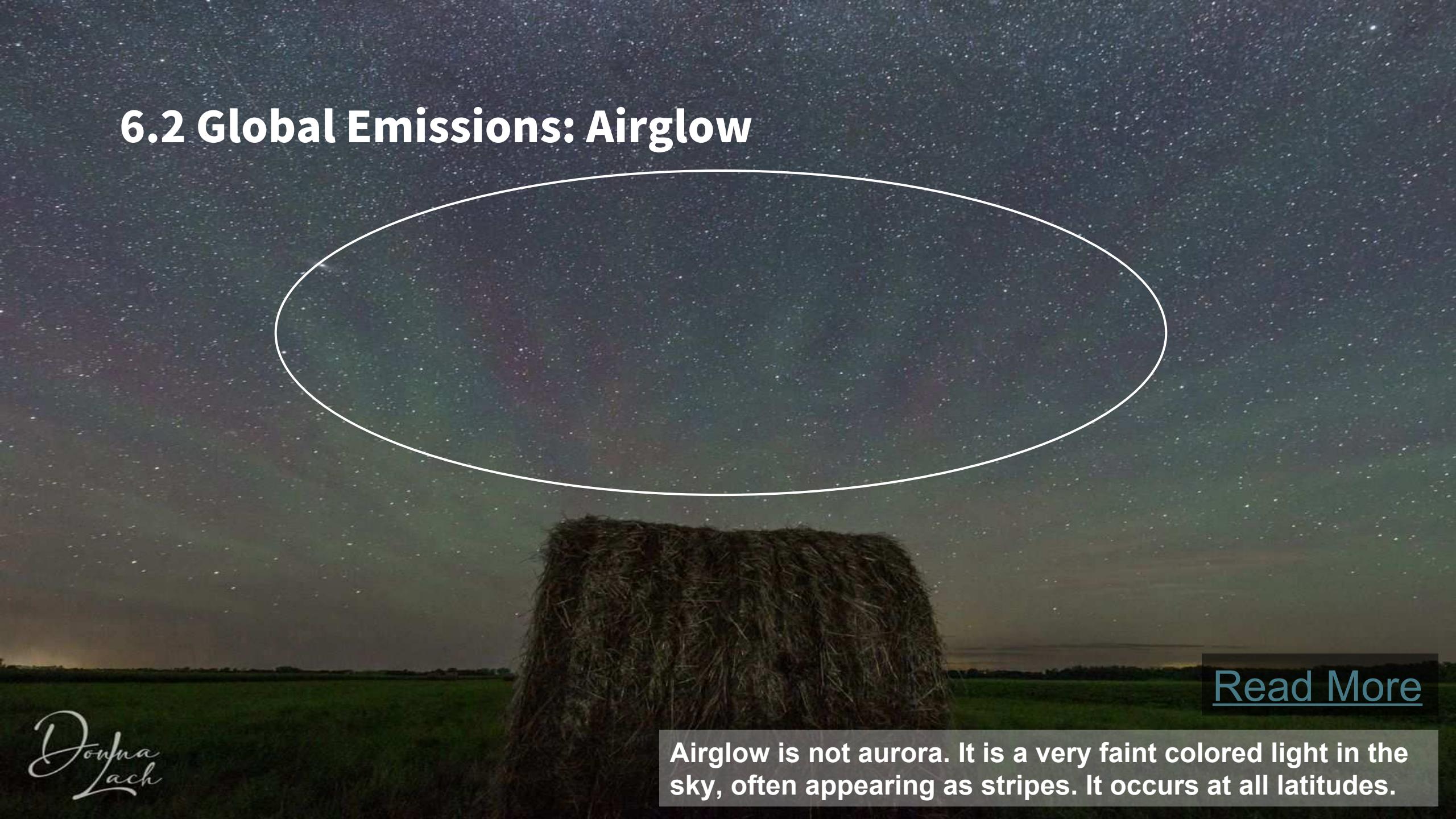
6.1 Mixtures of Different Types of Aurora



6.1 Mixtures of Different Types of Aurora



6.2 Global Emissions: Airglow



[Read More](#)

Airglow is not aurora. It is a very faint colored light in the sky, often appearing as stripes. It occurs at all latitudes.

Donna Lach

7. Aurora Reporting Websites

For scientists to use your images in research, you need to report them on an online aurora database.

You can use [Skywarden](#) or [Aurorasaurus](#)

Thank you for contributing to scientific discovery!

[Read More](#)

*Donna
Lach*

Happy Aurora Hunting!

A photograph of the night sky filled with a bright, swirling green aurora borealis. The aurora creates horizontal bands of light against a dark background. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several tall, leafless trees are visible against the aurora.