

Do look up... the joys of stargazing – with Isabelle Ficker



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Stimulated by an article I read in the Independent recently, discussing how increasingly lit cities at night now worryingly reduce the night sky view of stars – much more than scientists predicted – I was inspired to write about my chats and walk with long-term Suburb resident Isabelle Ficker. She has decided to take on the challenge of increasing local awareness of the dangers of excess light at night.

One early evening last December, Isabelle invited me to join her for a walk to the Heath Extension to do some stargazing (without binoculars). Neither of us had experience in stargazing, but with the aid of a couple of stargazing apps we intended to gain some impressions of the night sky and generally enjoy the experience of walking under the stars.

It was a cloudy night, but the Heath Extension was relatively dark allowing for some (limited) stargazing. Isabelle and I counted the stars. Isabelle counted 40

whilst I could see no more than 14 (presumably time for a visit to the opticians?). We checked our stargazing apps. I recognised Mars – it glowed with a yellowish hue – different from the stars – but not its usual red hue. We also noted two satellites which looked a bit like airplanes going past but without flashing red lights. Isabelle recalled with fondness a driving holiday with her sister in the Moroccan desert some years ago where they saw so many stars they couldn't see the blackness of the sky!

I asked Isabelle what made her so determined about spreading awareness about excess light at night. Isabelle explained how humans' eyes can adapt to the dark; you leave your lit up home and go out into the dark, you don't see clearly immediately but soon your eyes adjust. Isabelle said she has been worried for quite some time now about the increasing amount of spotlights and floodlights being installed in the Suburb in the name of security and how often the positioning of these lights can be misaligned and

unsympathetically installed, in our architecturally protected area.

Her bugbear is that installers put lights up in daylight but, unhelpfully, do not come back to test the lights for the effect they have on the surrounding area and neighbours at night. Isabelle believes the environment and our health suffer from excess artificial light at night; so we need to use it wisely. If someone wants security lighting it should be downward facing, and set to a non-overly sensitive movement sensor setting.

Isabelle described how respected studies (she referred me to a publication 'Blinded by the Light' by The Commission for Dark Skies, part of the British Astronomical Association) have shown how damaging LED lights (most commonly used for security lighting) are to wildlife, disturbing breeding and circadian cycles: song birds will sometimes sing at night as they get confused because it's bright and become exhausted, which affects breeding. Isabelle explained LED lights have also been known to affect human health, stopping us setting up circadian rhythms effectively, resulting in melatonin suppression (melatonin is needed to prevent depression).

Isabelle often walks alone at night to count stars and I asked if she ever felt nervous. Isabelle said her mother always directed her to look as though you know where you are going as it will make you appear much less vulnerable. Emboldened, I returned safely home from my star walk with Isabelle.

Isabelle's unbounded enthusiasm for preserving nature and wildlife by reducing the amount of light pollution has definitely made me think differently. I've even continued to try counting the stars from my balcony on some clearer nights. Recently, I managed to count up to 50 stars. I'm definitely getting the hang of stargazing.



Photo: Shelley-Anne Salisbury

A shout out for... the Archives Volunteers

These volunteers work tirelessly to curate, maintain and update the enormous amount of Hampstead Garden Suburb archive material stored at the HGS Trust offices as well as liaising with the archive staff at the London Metropolitan Archives in EC1 where more HGS archive material is held. Whether you are an historian, writer or a just a Suburb enthusiast, you will find a treasure trove of archived documents, objects and photographs relating to HGS and these volunteers will help point you in the right direction. Photographed at the Trust offices by Shelley-Anne Salisbury, they are (back left, clockwise) Chris Rafferty, Colin Gregory, John Atkin, Micky Watkins and Bruce Mackay.



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