

Into the Sunsets

Do we really have some of the most dramatic dusks around? Locals say yes — and science agrees.

BY BILL NEWCOTT | PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL ORHELEIN

Along Route 1, south of Indian River Inlet bridge, near Tower Shores



Indian River Inlet

Entangled in the cables of the Indian River Inlet Bridge, the setting sun slips toward the horizon beyond Rehoboth Bay.

It's early spring and nearly 50 degrees out, but the wind whipping from the Atlantic makes the air feel a lot colder than that. The tidal gush pouring through the inlet from the sea seems intent on extinguishing the remaining warmth of that sinking orange ball.

No other humans are in sight, so I share this deepening spectacle with a lineup of gulls. They stand at attention on the jetty rocks, facing down the sun with an intensity they usually reserve for tourists cradling bags of Thrasher's fries.

Along the horizon, a dark line of low clouds shifts to deep purple as the sun dips behind it. Almost imperceptibly, the sky above me morphs to royal blue. Between those cool blankets of color a ribbon of fire flashes from north to south, flaring bright yellow, then dimming to soft red.

For my feathered companions, the show is over. They flap away to wherever gulls spend the night. But I sense something coming: an encore reserved for the patient observer.

And here it is: Above me, a lacy curtain of high clouds explodes in a blush of rosy red that grows to encompass much of the sky. Then, like a supernova expanding itself, the crimson stain retreats, and the sky goes dark.

It is night. 🌅

If you happen to have a lot of friends in southern Delaware, you well know that locals tend to rave about their sunsets. I'm pretty sure Facebook's Mark

Zuckerberg has got the actual data lurking someplace, but it's my casual observation that social media sees more per-capita sunset postings from this area than just about anywhere else.

I'm guilty of this myself. It's not like we need to pull out easels and oil paints to capture sunsets, J.M.W. Turner-like — our palettes are in our pockets, and the iPhone has a sneaky way of making a sunset's reds that much redder and its clouds that much swirlier. A touch of the screen and that glorious image is delivered into the hands of all our friends (as well as our "friends"), along with a breathless account to the effect that "Delaware has the BEST SUNSETS ANYWHERE!!!"

Our more far-flung acquaintances, bless their little hearts, respond with pale, washed-out sunset images of their own. We acknowledge them with generous "likes" and "loves," but privately we shake our heads, pitying those whose sunsets fade in a dull Fuji Film snapshot while we bask in the widescreen glory of nightly Super Panavision Technicolor. 🌅

It's a safe bet that Dave Green has watched more Delaware sunsets on purpose than just about anyone. It's his job, in a way: In season, he welcomes visitors aboard his boat *Discovery* in Lewes, then noses the craft along the Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal and either up the Broadkill River or out into Delaware Bay. These excursions have one singular intention: To give Green's passengers a front-row seat to that fiery ball snuffing itself out on the horizon.

Green, whose day job is in real estate, didn't originally set sail to be a sunset impresario. His dream was — and still is — to provide scheduled water taxi service between Lewes, Rehoboth Beach and Dewey Beach. But when (now revived) plans for a dock in Rehoboth fell through in 2012, Green had to find another use for his boat. The answer to his dilemma was, to paraphrase Horace Greeley, to "Look west, young man!"

"One evening," he recalls, "my wife and kids and a buddy of mine sailed up the Broadkill, and then came that sunset.

"Once you get past civilization on the Broadkill, you round that corner and you've got the Great Marsh on your left and the Prime Hook preserve on your right. And the tree line is way, way back there. From an inland perspective, it's about the best view you can get of a sunset.

"I said, 'Holy crap, no one knows this is here!'"

For a couple of years, Green stuck to the river for sunset tours; now most of his trips head through the Roosevelt Inlet toward the Delaware Breakwater East End Lighthouse, built in 1885 and silhouetting sunsets ever since.

"We just head out there and start doing doughnuts so everyone gets their picture of the sunset," says Green, who this year has permission to tie up at the end of the breakwater and usher his passengers ashore.

"People are just in awe of the sunsets. They go bonkers. My favorite comment ever was from a 5-year-old boy. He just stared at the sunset and said, 'This is the best day of my life!'"

Green has to stay at the wheel, of course, but admits to sneaking a good long look each trip.

"I've always been a sunset guy," he confesses. "My wife said, 'Oh, you're gonna get so bored just doing sunset cruises.' But here's the thing about sunsets: They're like snowflakes. No two are alike." 🌅

The cars slow down as they near the spot where I've pulled over on Beaver Dam Road, right where it intersects with Dairy Farm Road.

No one else stops, yet I am not alone as I soak in this sunset. A chorus line of cows, lowing softly, is pressed up against a wire fence, facing the reddening sky. Their big bovine eyes and metal ear tags reflect points of twilight. >

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Indian River Bay from Sandy Cove Road, Ocean View



Little Assawoman Bay, Fenwick Island



At Cape Henlopen State Park

From this vantage point, tree lines on either side of the vast field before me recede toward the setting sun, adding a third dimension to the tableau. The field's low rills, ploughed into ripples, glow like embers, and at the far end, a mile or so away, the narrow gaps in a tall stand of trees resemble the grates of a glowing fireplace.

The sky purples. The cows raise their heads slightly, then turn and plod toward their evening ritual. I guess it's true: I'll watch sunsets 'til the cows come home. ☀️

Southern Delaware folks like to boast that we live smack in the middle of Sunset Central. But do we *really*? It seems almost sacrilegious to broach the question, but couldn't Delaware Sunset Syndrome reflect the same kind of provincial thinking that causes, say, Californians to claim they have the best skiing and Washington, D.C., fans to insist they field a professional football team?

I had to admit that maybe, just *maybe*, we in Delaware live under a sunset delusion. But how in the world do you quantify a sunset? How do you grade one area's sunsets against another? As those perplexed nuns in "The Sound of Music" might sing, how do you hold a sunbeam in your hand?

Luckily, I've been around long enough to know there's no subject for which there is not at least one expert. And as it happens, there are at least three world-class sunset authorities, and they all work out of Penn State University.

And so one day I drove through the rolling mountains of central Pennsylvania and descended into the comfortable recesses of the place called Happy Valley. There would be no sunset here tonight. Clouds hung low and a cold wind whistled through the campus. I found the entrance to the Eric A. Walker Building, took an elevator to the top floor, and was met by a nice young gentleman named Ben Reppert.

We sat in his small office, crammed with computer terminals and Penn State ephemera. On a coat rack hung a small selection of neckties, standing by for use during Reppert's nightly appearance on the university's long-running weather program. Like all TV meteorologists, Reppert forecasts rain and fog and wind chill factors. But as a bonus, he also predicts the quality of each night's sunset.

A 2015 Penn State graduate, Reppert helped hatch the idea for sunset predictions along with classmate and fellow meteorology major Jake DeFlicht, who worked part-time as a university photographer.

"I'd drive Jake around to take pictures, because I had a car," said Reppert. "Many times we'd plan to take a good sunset picture — and it

would be a dud. Eventually he came up with this idea: We've got the meteorology education; we can make something that could forecast this. So we thought about it."

The first question was obvious: What makes a good sunset?

"If you were to ask 10 people how they would define a perfect sunset, you'd probably get nine different answers," Reppert allowed. "We decided we wouldn't go for the perfectly clear sky, with no clouds around, no color. We set as our base sunsets where clouds get lit up with the reds and the oranges."

As it turns out, there are just a few, very easily identified, conditions that create that kind of sunset. Reppert pulled out a sheet of paper and sketched a sublimely simple atmospheric cross-section.

He drew a curved line, representing the Earth, with a stick figure (me) at one end and the setting sun at the other — each of us just out of each other's line of sight due to the Earth's curvature. Near the sun he drew the distinctive weather map "H," indicating a high-pressure system with clear skies. At my end he drew an "L," denoting a low-pressure system. Then he added some clouds — one layer very high up in the atmosphere, the other closer to the ground.

"Ideally, the air near the sun's horizon at sunset is completely clear, with very little water vapor," said Reppert. "As the sun sets,

the light passes through the thick, clear air, which acts as a prism and pulls out the red and orange wavelengths."

But those brilliant colors will simply refract off into space unless there's something to reflect them back to Earth, and that's where those clouds come in.

"I like to think of the clouds as a projection screen," he explained. "The clouds catch those reds and oranges. And when they're at different levels they catch different wavelengths of sunlight, so you get that spectrum of colors."

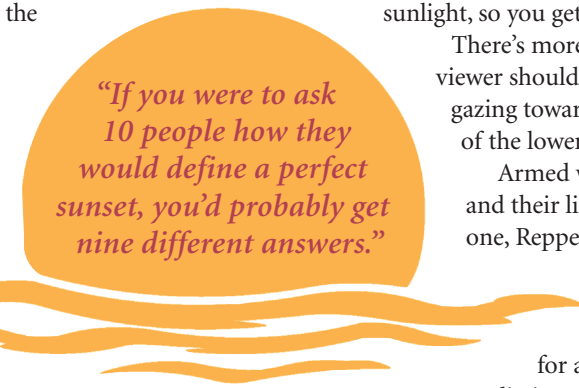
There's more to it, of course, but ideally, a sunset viewer should be standing in a low pressure zone gazing toward a high pressure zone in the direction of the lowering sun.

Armed with their definition of a perfect sunset and their list of ideal weather conditions to create one, Reppert and DeFlicht enlisted an undergraduate computer whiz, Steve Hallett, to work up a program into which they could feed atmospheric data

for any given spot — and get reliable predictions for a given evening's sunset quality.

The result is a map that displays a color-coded North American continent with hues from cold blue, for minimal sunset beauty, to hot red, the kind of sunset against which you'd expect to see Scarlett O'Hara shouting, "I'll never be hungry again!"

They started a company, SunsetWx, and began posting nightly sunset and sunrise quality predictions on their website (sunsetwx.com). No one took much notice until Nov. 22, 2015,



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At Marshy Hope Road, Ocean View

Reppert seemed a little hurt when I told him that sunset skipper David Green isn't really a fan of his service.

"I don't like people trying to cherry-pick their sunsets," Green had told me, and for obvious reasons: If the forecasters predict a fizzle, folks will be less likely to climb aboard the *Discovery* that evening.

"I guess I understand," Reppert said sadly. Then he perked up. "But our forecast only goes out a day or two ahead. People probably make their plans long before that."

Eventually, I had to put the critical question to Reppert: In the Big Book of American Sunsets, just where do southern Delaware's rate?

He smiled. I felt like he was going to give me good news. ☀️

F. Scott Fitzgerald looked at sunsets as frames of beauty ("Her face, ivory gold against the blurred sunset that strove through the rain...") and also of dread ("The Montana sunset lay between the mountains like a giant bruise from which darkened arteries spread across a poisoned sky").

As for sunsets and me, we go back a long way. Among my earliest memories is sitting on my bed in Dumont, N.J., watching the sky turn red over the nearby Safeway supermarket. (Hey, when you grow up in North Jersey, you take your Nature's Wonderland moments wherever you can.) As a 16-year-old, standing with my brother Ed on a hilltop above Florence, Italy, I

caught my breath as the dimming sun set the red tile roofs of Tuscany ablaze — and

"Clouds catch those reds and oranges, and different wavelengths of sunlight [resulting in] a spectrum of colors."

when their projection map showed a blood-red gash stretching across one of the nation's most densely populated regions, from Washington to Philadelphia, up through New York City and into New England.

"We said, 'We should be tweeting this!'" said Reppert. The prediction was spot-on: *Slate* magazine and "Good Morning America" took notice, and SunsetWx was propelled to a level of success that now includes a partnership with the Weather Channel.

They happen every evening, and they're difficult to miss, so it's not surprising that people have been ascribing significance to sunsets for most of history.

Even in the Bible, in Matthew 16:2, Jesus Himself vouches for the veracity of the apparently very old trope "Red sky at night, sailor's delight" (and if religion is not your thing, Penn State's Ben Reppert concurs).

wished, for a moment, that I was standing there with someone other than my brother Ed. In Sedona, Ariz., I marveled as the sun's bloody rays emulsified with the air's suspension of red dust, creating a sense of swimming through plasma. Some of the world's most dramatic sunsets unfold with your back to the sun: From the summit of Hawaii's Mauna Kea, I watched the volcano's lengthening shadow race eastward across the Pacific, and at Yosemite's Inspiration Point I witnessed purple silhouettes climb the valley's sheer walls.

Sunsets can even have lifelong consequences. In 2010 I was at a convention in Orlando, Fla., where I made a dinner date with a female colleague I had only recently met. As dinnertime approached, from my seventh-floor hotel room window I could tell the sun was going to set, spectacularly, over the distant castles and domes of Walt Disney World. I raced down to the lobby and found my dinner companion waiting at the restaurant door.

"This is going to sound crazy," I stumbled, "but the sun is about to set and I'm going to have a terrific view from my window upstairs. Would you mind coming up for just a couple of minutes?" >

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At The Point at Cape Henlopen State Park

so you have the sun setting over a dry land mass. That's an ideal case — in Delaware you can bet on having clouds overhead, but the sun is passing through an area that is land-based and clear.”

Choke on *that*, Malibu!

There's also the matter of southern Delaware's expansive sky. The land is flat, of course, but because the area was cultivated as farmland for centuries, there also aren't a lot of big trees to get in the way of our skyscape. As a result, the sun here not only has a full palette of paints, it also boasts a canvas that stretches from horizon to horizon and as high as a circling red-tailed hawk. 🌅

“Sunsets have a better chance [than sunrises] of being spectacular. You have more clouds to get lit up.”

a hook in the water, then leans back in a folding chair, closes his eyes and starts nodding to beats in his earbuds.

The air was comfortably warm when I came out here, but as the sun approaches one diameter of the horizon — marked by a pencil-thin line of trees — a cool breeze from the west has kicked up. I turn my back to the wind. The whitewashed Harbor of

Refuge Lighthouse is bathed in pink, slowly shifting to a deeper shade of red, as are the frothy wave tips playing about its base.

Back to the west, the sun's disk has called it a day. An inbound Cape May-Lewes Ferry, silhouetted against the darkening sky, slips by. A few passengers stand on deck, their cameras flashing in a ridiculous effort to illuminate the cosmos.

I turn to leave, but am stopped in my tracks. Although the sun is gone, all around me the horizon has become a glorious cyclorama, aglow with a ghostly belt of red, translucent against a field of deepening blue.

The sound of the wind and waves seems to fall away. My eyes search the length of the pier. Is anyone else seeing this?

I glance back at the earbud fisherman. He's still nodding. But his eyes are open. ■

BILL NEWCOTT, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives in Lewes.

Well, *that* could have gone any number of ways. But she smiled sweetly and said, “Sure! I love sunsets.”

As it turned out, the sunset sort of fizzled. But true to my word, I got us back to the restaurant in time for our reservation. And oh, yeah, I married that woman. And I still call her to the window when the western sky goes epic, and she still says, “I love sunsets.” She's perfect that way.

Most of us watch sunsets because they're beautiful: In Key West, Fla., and Santorini, Greece, the setting of the sun sparks bacchanals of drinking and dancing. But there are also those who insist sunset watching is somehow physically and mentally good for you. An Indian guru named Hira Ratan Manek claims to have fasted for 15 years — nourished only by sunlight, which he absorbed by looking directly at sunsets and sunrises. (Even health guru Andrew Weil, as wholistic a physician as you'll find, warns that the practice, called sun-gazing, “carries a real risk of retinal damage. I urge you to avoid it.”) And *Psychology Today*, noting a study at University of California, Berkeley (where else?), reported that stopping your daily activity to admire a billowing sunset is an instinctual way to disengage, if only for a moment, from fretting about the past and worrying about the future. 🌅

Some folks swear by them, but I've always considered sunrises to be the poorly dressed stepsisters of sunsets. And while Penn State's Ben Reppert and his colleagues do indeed issue sunrise quality predictions each day, it was

gratifying to hear him affirm my somewhat judgmental attitude.

“Sunsets have a better chance of being spectacular,” Reppert said. “During the course of the day the sun heats the ground, so warm air rises, which promotes clouds. Overnight you don't have rising air, so you have a hard time producing clouds in the morning. You have better sunsets mainly due to the fact that you have more clouds to get lit up.”

Even Delaware die-hards have to admit that when it comes to consistency in sunset shows, America's Desert Southwest is the reigning heavyweight champ. The desert air is uncannily clear, and when it reflects off the high clouds that typify a dry climate, it's like Monet has been reincarnated as a skywriter.

But there's no shame in a strong runner-up showing: Reppert says that residents of and visitors to Delaware are not wrong when they get boastful about the frequent beauty of their sunsets. It has a lot to do with Sussex County's distinctive locale: We sit here at the ocean with the broad, flat Delmarva Peninsula spreading to the west. The moist climate of the wide Chesapeake Bay lies beyond that, followed by the whole of North America.

“It's a unique circumstance,” he said. “Along America's West Coast, say, in California, it's hard to get a good sunset. You've got water going forever to your west. There can often be a lot of clouds over that water, and often they're low.

“In Delaware, though, you have water to the east and water to the west, enough moisture to promote cloud development overhead. But there's also a lot of land to the west,



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