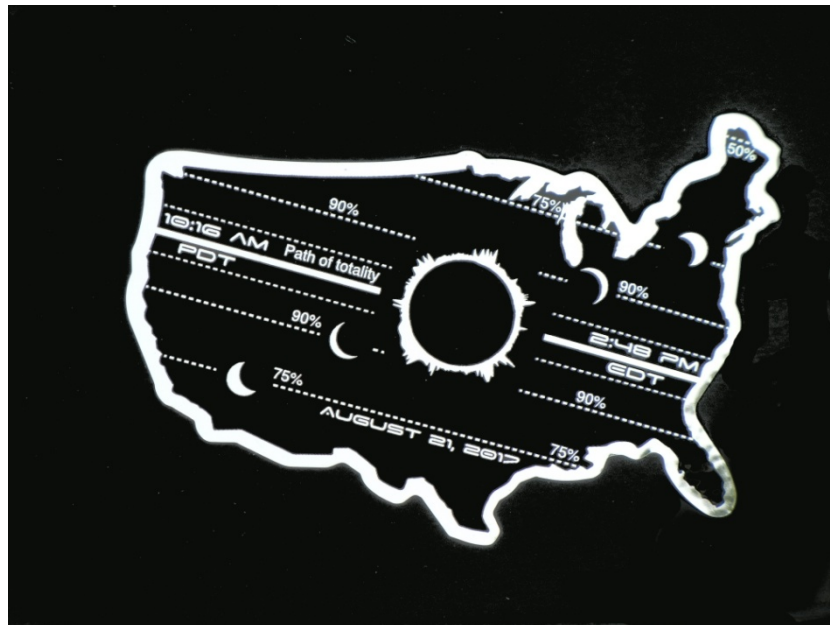


8/21/2017

HAVE
ELEMENT
WILL
TRAVEL

ECLIPSE 2017 – TREK TO TOTALITY



Or, How We Managed Not to Miss the Party

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Scheming and Planning

I hadn't kept up with upcoming eclipses and didn't realize until February that the Great American Eclipse on August 21st was coming. Joanna didn't think she would be able to go because her school job started the week of the eclipse. I put in for vacation from work then but put off making reservations anywhere thinking that there wouldn't be a lot of interest in it (wrong!) and when push came to shove I could just camp out in the car any old place – in alleys, behind brewpubs - reputable places like that.

In May Joanna discovered that a co-worker was going to the event, so it was possible to break away. We changed the itinerary and looked for places to stay, but it was already getting nuts finding reservations near the line of totality; desirable because those places would provide around two minutes of dark. Based on what was being charged for reservations nearby, we made reservations in Klamath Falls, a 3+ hour drive away. I blithely assumed we'd check in and leave at midnight, drive north on Route 97 through Bend, then find a spot on the side of the road somewhere a bit south of Madras, Oregon, the site NASA had selected as the best odds of viewing totality in the United States. Then, with a couple of large steaming cups of Starbucks java, we'd watch the sun come up.

Route 26 runs southeast of Madras down to Prineville; it looked like a winner, and of course hardly anybody would think of stopping along that road. The question of how to get there was a simple task of avoiding traffic running north on Route 97 into Madras. Hummm: run east out of Bend to Prineville, then head northwest on Route 26? Piece of cake! Nobody would even consider going out of their way to Prineville, with only a minute of totality, then jog back towards Madras with its over 2 minutes of totality.

Friends in the Mix

Another factor in the plans was a former neighbor Sandra lives in Ashland, Oregon; as long as we were going to be in the vicinity, well, we'd drop in and visit. The basic plan was in place; leave home Saturday morning and drive to Ashland and spend the night with Sandra, then drive east to Klamath Falls and maybe check in at 3 p.m., ruffle the sheets, then drive north on 97 towards Bend late in the evening.

A co-worker of Joanna's, Susan, was going with Dickson who had friends living in Bend; there they could park and stay in place well ahead of the rush. Then, the day before the eclipse they'd move to a location close to the line of totality. They left for Bend four days before the event.

A friend of ours, Kathie, became interested in the eclipse and early on predicted (pretty accurately) what the scene would be like in the Bend/Prineville/Madras (Route 97) area, and the Salem (I-5) area. She is a former state park ranger, quite comfortable traveling alone on her adventures and sacking out in her truck as needed, taking advantage of parks and National Forest lands. She planned on staying in John Day, well east of Bend and would approach from the south via Route 395, arriving well ahead of time on Thursday to avoid traffic and perhaps gas shortages. When she visited us in Cotati we plotted and schemed with Google Earth to find potential viewing locations in the John Day vicinity. She left for John Day four days before the event.

Preparation for the Trek North

I had time off before the day of departure and got ready. I'd bought a gas can and tried it out the week before and discovered I needed a long, narrow funnel (the first one I bought was too short) in order to get

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the last half gallon out of the can since its nozzle was too short to raise the can vertically. We have car racks and a cargo box that sits on top, giving us extra room to pack our gear.

Our car is a Honda Element; the vehicle has a ‘lounge chair’ configuration so that when the rear seat flattens down the flattened front seat back provides leg support. There are also curtains that you can install and voila! you have a quasi RV. It was a good time to replace the tires as they were getting pretty worn, and get an oil change. Extra food and water was part of the drill - reports were starting to filter in that there might be shortages of basic goods, and you could get stranded between towns because of traffic, accidents, running out of gas, etc. Four days before the event we heard reports of a monster traffic jam from Prineville to Madras. I filled the gas can, bought provisions, and we packed the car.

The Trek to Ashland - Saturday

We set off Saturday morning driving the route we normally go on a trip north to take advantage of faster roads; the path is longer in distance but shorter in time. After leaving Sonoma and Napa counties we gained the I-80, then the I-505 cutoff, and then finally the Mother Road: the I-5. There was a fair amount of traffic on that route, and it got thicker as we went north. I stopped for gas whenever we got down to a half tank.

The air got hazier as we drove north. It had been hazy in Sonoma County with a somewhat unhealthy cast, but by the time we got to Shasta City we could smell smoke in the air. We stopped there to stretch our legs and I asked about the conditions at the local climbing shop, The Fifth Season. Fires all around, they said. By the time we passed Yreka the smoke was so thick it was hard to make out nearby hills and you could feel smoke at the back of the throat. When we crossed the Oregon border and rolled into Ashland the air was a bit better, but not by much.

Sandra greeted us and treated us to a fine dinner. We got caught up with what had been going on in our respective lives and finally turned in.

We also got word from our friend Kathie, in place in John Day; things were getting weird in the west towards Bend and Madras. Susan, in Bend, also called; she and Dickson were heading east on Route 26, and had found a place to spend the night before the eclipse a bit west and north of John Day.

The Trek to Klamath Falls and Beyond - Sunday

The next morning Sandra made another fine meal to help us greet the day. It was quite the feast!

The news around the state sounded as if the crowds to the eclipse were going to be huge; I was getting concerned that our plan to go to Klamath Falls, then head north on Route 97 was not much of a plan and that there was an excellent chance that we would be caught in massive traffic and miss the event. There was the other route, farther east, past Klamath Falls: Route 395. It would be longer, remote, and with substantial gaps between gas stations. The Element is no gas-sipping hybrid; even with the gas can its range isn't that great. Dropping into a town with no gas available would be a drag.

The change of plan meant leaving right after breakfast and getting to Klamath Falls sooner rather than later; we'd tag the motel to let them know we wouldn't be in that night but would be back (post-eclipse) Monday night.

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We made our good-byes and off we went. Shortly out of town, on Route 66 (it's a different Route 66 than the famous one from Chicago to L.A. they sing about getting your kicks) we ran into a detour that ran us up into the mountains, past lodges and lakes; it added an hour to our drive to K-Falls. Wow. Not a good sign.

Eventually we got off the mountain to Rte 66 and drove into Klamath Falls, gassed up, stopped by the motel, then headed down Route 140 to Lake View. Not too winding and a relatively fast road. Eventually we pulled into town and Joanna navigated us to an empty lot with shade trees; there we stopped for lunch and coffee. We gassed up at the station in town and encountered a fellow with a 10 gallon gas can that was having trouble trying to fill up a late-model car. I pulled out the skinny funnel, but that didn't work either. There was some kind of metal flap that prevented fingers, funnels and so on from pushing into the pipe. A gasoline nozzle had no problem getting the flap to open, though. This guy should have tested his gas can before going on a trip like this.

We got a call from Kathie; she'd found that the Oregon State Park system was opening up overflow space at various parks, and at the Clyde Holliday park in particular. She asked if we would like her to get a slot for us there. Heck yeah! Now all we had to was get there.

We turned north onto Route 395 and drove up to Riley, gassed up, then took a shorter jog east to Burns, then turned north again in gathering twilight up scenic rock outcroppings onto a plateau, and finally dropped down a steep head wall into John Day. A bit west of town we spotted Kathie at the park over flow parking and pulled in. We still had a bit of daylight.

It was a humble spot on the dirt but we made a bit of an enclave by backing in between Kathie's truck and a large Mercedes touring van, making a V with the hoods of our vehicles close together and the rears farther apart. Route 26 was perhaps 50 feet to our rear but there was a big pile of brush and detritus between us and the road; the remaining 'window' to the road was narrow enough to afford dynamic drive-by privacy. Quick! Some wine, a beer, some snacks, then off to an eclipse presentation by Dave the Engineer.

We had a chance to see the real park; it's nice enough with a stream running along the south edge, but Route 395 runs along the north edge so there is always some traffic noise. There were plenty of trees, though, and up-to-date showers/restrooms; generally pleasant.

We wandered back to the cars after the lecture and turned in.

Show Time

In the morning there was plenty of time to heat water for Starbucks® instant coffee and break out the granola. There was a couple next to us in the Mercedes touring van/bus, and a man in a car next to them. The husband turned out to be a 40-something Turkish guy, Mustafa; Anne, his spouse was a somewhat younger American. The third neighbor in a separate car was a professor, Robert, from the University of Seattle; he set up some pretty high-end equipment. One of these was a dedicated solar telescope with a hydrogen-alpha filter; the band-pass was so narrow (0.7\AA or 0.07 nanometers) it filtered out enough light that you could look through this directly at the sun. Because of the wavelength of the light passed you could see details on the sun's surface: prominences, sunspots, and other solar 'weather'. Viewing an approaching solar eclipse through this was a piece of cake.

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As we waited for the world to get dark, I hiked into the main part of the park and took pictures of visitors in eclipse T-shirts and other eclipse signage. The sound of a lawnmower overhead heralded a patriotic-themed ultra-light aircraft flying east.

Dave the Engineer was over by the maintenance shed setting up his CATE (Continental-America Telescopic Eclipse) Experiment equipment. He was part of a small army of observers all along the eclipse path, recording the moments of totality. All this footage would be spliced together later to make a 90 minute continuous video of totality from coast to coast. His wife Mina was with him. Shortly we were joined by Mustafa and we found that Mina was from Turkey; she and Moose exchanged a few words in Turkish.

It Begins

A call went out and people put on their eclipse glasses; you could see a chip taken out of the edge of the sun with no other aid. Park staff had set up a line of folding chairs and now they were all looking up through their glasses at the spectacle. It was reminiscent of an image of people viewing an atomic test in 1950's Nevada, all looking in the same direction wearing dark glasses and sitting on lawn-chairs. Oooo! Aaahhhh!

I headed back to the car and laid a white sheet on the ground. There were supposed to be ripples of light that appeared as totality neared, and it would make a good backdrop for pinhole fun. Joanna had brought a colander; periodically I'd hold it up to see what sort of patterns would emerge. It wasn't very impressive at first. As the moon covered the sun more I wandered back to Dave the Engineer's installation to have a look through his equipment and on the way back tried making animal shadow heads with one hand. The further the eclipse progressed the more the shape of the eyes formed by small gaps in the fingers became cartoon-like crescents. Back at the campsite the colander really began to put on a show as totality approached, and passersby were as interested in the cascade of crescents the kitchen aid projected as they were in the high-tech telescopes nearby. At this point there were still no ripples of light that caught our attention.

The sun was becoming a narrow sliver; the ambient light dropped off and it became noticeably cooler. Everything seemed drained of color and losing shadow: more of the incoming light was coming from the edge of the shadow. I put on a jacket and looked up at the thinning crescent through the eclipse glasses. There were few spots of light coming through coming from somewhere besides the sun; these turned out to be reflections of the sun on a car's windshield, and it looked like a crescent. Venus was visible. The crescent began to depart, replaced by a ragged arc of light bits, then there were fewer, and suddenly all were gone.

Totality

I pulled away the eclipse glasses and there it was: a black disk surrounded by a ghostly, unexpectedly asymmetric corona. It was stunning. I had a subliminal sense of enormous spheres in motion, slow moving to the eye but in reality moving at great speed. I strained to see earthshine on the dark side of the moon without success, then grabbed Aunt Pat's 7x50 night glasses. Still nothing definite so I tried to observe movement of the corona. I didn't make it out and set the glasses aside. The camera was handy and I thought to give it one try, so I zoomed in with the telephoto and pressed the shutter, leaving it up to chance for the result. The camera emitted a series of 'red-eye' abatement flashes and made the exposure

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with a final flash. I set it down and looked back up at the wonder above, again trying to see corona motion. Regulus was visible outside the corona but I didn't spend time chasing down other stars and planets. I did take a glance around in the cool, dim, weird, shadowless, gray gloom; it wasn't like any kind of twilight I'd seen before.

When I looked up again at the eerie anomaly I began to get short of breath. I knew what was going on but this was unique to my experience and freaky. Understanding the cause of a total eclipse in the early 21st century doesn't negate the wonder of it; doesn't allay a vague feeling of dread. With little understanding of what a solar eclipse was, ancient peoples must have experienced mass panic during and after one.

Then a flash of light peaked out behind the disk and totality was over. It was back to the eclipse glasses. The ambient light was still wan and stayed that way for some time, gradually strengthening. Pepper was flopped down on the sheet; the normally lively dog acted as if she was on downers and stayed that way until after the light returned full strength.

Epilogue

Knowing the relative sizes of the sun and moon (sun is 400 times larger, give or take a bit), the distances (the sun is 400 times farther away from the earth than the moon, give or take), the equivalent size they appear to be from earth give or take, the tilted elliptical orbit of the moon, the elliptical orbit of earth and its varying distance from the sun, adds another layer of wonder beyond the first hand experience: coincidence on coincidence is necessary for totality to happen at all. That it is a predictable event down to the second and meter is even more astonishing.

A couple of things I expected to see and didn't were 1) strange, rippling light on the sheet as totality approached and receded, and 2) a shadow approaching at over a thousand miles an hour as totality was imminent, and immediately afterwards as the shadow fled. Perhaps the distraction of the events overhead lured me and others away from these other transient oddities. And, in order to see the shadow approaching and receding it was necessary to be on a rise with a long view in one or both directions. I've met someone that described seeing it; he and his spouse were on an eclipse cruise back in '91 with an unencumbered 360° view and eclipse guides calling out to look for various phenomena.