

# Watching the Eclipse in Oregon

**Nicholas Kristof** AUG. 21, 2017



Lee Cooper, from England, wears his protective glasses to watch the beginning of the solar eclipse from Salem. Don Ryan/Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — It was a lovely August morning here in Salem, with a warm sun blazing from a blue sky, when the world began to end.

Or that's what it felt like. Imperceptibly the sky darkened, and instead of growing hotter, the air grew cool. It was as if dusk began at 9:30 a.m.

Then, abruptly, in just a few minutes, a bit after 10 a.m., night spread across Salem, where I was watching the eclipse with my family. (I'm originally from Oregon.) Cars were obliged to use their headlights, and I had to pull out my headlamp. The throngs of eclipse-watchers on the State Capitol grounds cheered and roared with approval.



The “totality” of the eclipse lasted almost two minutes. Venus and Jupiter appeared in the “night” sky, and confused birds reportedly began to sing their evening songs. NASA, via European Pressphoto Agency

Eclipse-mania has shadowed Oregon for many days. Flights have been jammed full, and some cars are said to be renting for many hundreds of dollars a day. Shops ran out of eclipse sunglasses, and customers began lining up before 4:30 a.m. in front of a coffee shop that gave away eclipse glasses with coffee (later it recalled the glasses as ineffective!).

With many hotels full, farmers are renting their fields to campers. As we drove to Salem on back roads, we saw people setting up lawn chairs hours early to get prime eclipse-watching sites on farmers’ fields. The “totality” of the eclipse lasted almost two minutes. Venus and Jupiter appeared in the “night” sky, and confused birds reportedly began to sing their evening songs. I understood why the ancient Chinese [thought](#) that an eclipse reflected dragons eating the sun. Or why the Arapaho Indians thought that darkness came because the sun and the moon were having sex in the sky.

“It was incredible!” said Zoey Castillo, a 9-year-old who was part of a group of Girl Scouts invited to watch the eclipse from the balcony of Gov. Kate Brown’s office. “I’m so glad I got to watch it one time in my life!”



Jonathan Moric, left, and Finn Power, both of Vancouver, get ready to watch the eclipse in Salem on Monday. Andrew Selsky/Associated Press

Miranda Trentzsch, also 9, said the Girl Scouts had been told that the next total solar eclipse in Salem would come in 2108 and added: “If I live to be 100, then my kids can watch the next solar eclipse with me!”

The greatest drama only lasted about five minutes — the sudden darkening, the disappearance of the sun behind the moon, and then its reappearance and what seemed the breaking of a new day — but the crowds of watchers oohed and aahed and roared their approval.

After viewing my first total solar eclipse, a couple of reflections:

First, the appeal of the solar eclipse is not just its rarity, but the way it puts us in our place. It disrupts the routines we rely on and reminds us of the vastness, beauty and rigor of the solar system.

One moment we are the masters of the universe. The next, the moon occludes the sun and we have to wait for light to reappear. Yet there’s also a majesty in the way scientists predict eclipses with such precision. We may not be masters of the universe, but our astronomers are masterful at taking apart the celestial clocks.



Dan Blanchette and his son, Sam, watch the solar eclipse in Salem, Oregon, on Monday. Don Ryan/Associated Press

Scientists know to the minute when eclipses will happen many years from now. This scientific precision diminishes the sense of superstitious fear and awe that accompanied such past events. In Shakespeare's "Macbeth," the murder of King Duncan seems to lead to a solar eclipse that turns the day dark and reflects the horror and evil of human misconduct; today, the punctual arrival of an eclipse seems a tribute less to superstition than to mathematical exactitude.

Second, there was no controversy about the arrival of this eclipse; we all accepted the scientific consensus about its timing and swarmed to the best viewpoints. So why is there such resistance to the similar scientific consensus about other foretold events — such as climate change?

My Times colleague Justin Gillis made this point in [a notable article](#): We as a society clearly trust scientists in their predictions about eclipses but ignore the scientific warnings about the far more dire consequences of our cooking the planet. As Gillis notes, it's not as if such cautions are new, for scientists have been discussing global warming since 1897. Nor is the problem that the climate warnings have not been verified, for global average temperatures have indeed risen almost 2 degrees Fahrenheit since then

"The scientists told us that the Arctic would warm especially fast," Gillis noted. "They told us to expect [heavier rainstorms](#). They told us [heat waves](#) would soar. They told us that the oceans would rise. All of those things have come to pass."

I chatted with Governor Brown during the eclipse, and she dryly made the point: "In Oregon, we actually make public policy based on science and data." It would be nice if Congress did the same.

Obviously, there remains a range of climate possibilities ahead, partly because feedback loops are difficult to predict and uncertainty is inevitable. There's also a legitimate debate about the best policy

responses to climate change — but our national response so far has been little more than a shrug, and that's difficult to reconcile with the scientific consensus about the risks ahead.

It's a new day in Salem again. We now understand that a solar eclipse isn't an apocalypse, and our confidence that the world isn't ending is a reminder of our increasing understanding of the vast universe around us.

As the light returns and the sky warms, I'll be celebrating not just the majesty of the heavens but also the wisdom of the scientists. I wish I had similar confidence in the rest of us to recognize other atmospheric risks that will be far more consequential for our planet.

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