

# Where (and how) to view the solar eclipse in Eastern Oregon

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Oregon is blessed that a total solar eclipse is slicing across the state this August. The path of totality — where the moon and sun will perfectly align for minutes, the former blocking out the latter — looks like a belt snugly securing its midsection from west to east.

In Eastern Oregon that belt crosses over Baker City, Fossil, John Day, Ontario, Prairie City and Seneca, as well as countless other farm fields and timbered hills and sagebrush flats.

A total eclipse crossing America from coast to coast has not happened in a century, so it will likely draw quite a crowd from places not lucky enough to fall within the belt. Travel Oregon is expecting a million visitors to descend on this state alone.

Almost two-thirds of all Americans live within 500 miles of the totality zone, and many will make that drive. Emergency responders are expecting that if just two percent do, it will cause the largest traffic jam in American history.

Kelly Beatty, editor of astronomy magazine *Sky & Telescope*, described recently on NPR what the eclipse will look and feel like: “Where the sun was, there is a black bullet hole in the sky. You see the sun’s feathery corona, its atmosphere. Who knew the sun had an atmosphere, like electric white cotton candy? The sky gets dark. Stars come out. It gets colder. It’s a multi-sensory extravaganza.”

Beatty has flown across the world to witness them, so you can bet that people will drive a few hours or more to squeeze into the path of totality and bear witness. And Eastern Oregon will prove especially popular, due to its often clear skies, empty spaces and lack of viewshed obstructions. Should locals beat the crowds or join them? Here are some ideas on how to spend the day.

## Stay home, stay safe, save money

**What:** Staying outside the totality zone and sleeping in your own bed

**Where:** All of Umatilla and Morrow counties

Perhaps fighting all the traffic, jockeying for camping space or paying out the wazoo for a plot of land to park your RV sounds like a stressful trip and a waste of time and money.

Nothing is simpler than taking a long lunch break and watching the partial eclipse from your back porch in Umatilla or Morrow counties. In Pendleton, the eclipse will hit about 95 percent of totality, and a little less than that in Hermiston.

While that sounds like a big number, the difference between 95 percent and 100 percent will be dramatic. The world around you will not become dark as night, stars won’t come out and birds likely won’t roost. In fact, if you’re not looking at the sun or aware of the commotion, you may not notice the slow dimming of the sky that will increase incrementally over the course of hours. Also, you won’t be able to look directly at the sun without the use of protective lenses.

And by staying in town, you won’t be able to avoid all of eclipse-seeker congestion either. The interstates will be clogged across the region, supermarkets and gas stations will have long lines, restaurants will be overwhelmed.

It may take much longer than usual to drive 70 miles or so south, but the experience will be vastly better there than in much of Umatilla and Morrow counties.

## Spurge on top-notch arts and science

**What:** Atlas Obscura’s Total Eclipse festival of science, music and celestial wonder

**Where:** Roughly 30 miles east of Baker City in the Burnt River Valley

Cosmos-inspired jazz of the Sun Ra Arkestra should be enough to entice anyone to spend time in an field in the Burnt River Valley while the moon and sun become one.

Add to the music the director of outreach for Columbia University’s Department of Astronomy, editors and writers from *The Atlantic*, *Scientific American*, *Atlas Obscura* and the organizations *National Parks at Night* and *Science Friday*, and you’re bound to get a remarkable explanation of what you’re witnessing and cogent analysis of the celestial forces at play in our solar system and our lives.

You will pay for the pleasure, however. The *Atlas Obscura* bash has a general admission ticket starting at \$250. That ticket allows you to bring your own camping equipment and set up camp on a private, irrigated meadow. There are more luxurious “glamping” options available,



The view from the peak of Strawberry Mountain in Grant County, one of five spots to watch the solar eclipse on Aug. 21.

too — a deluxe tent cabin for two people and two nights will set you back a cool \$1,500. According to organizers, everything you need will be on site: food and water, bathroom facilities, medics and a general store.

For a once-in-a-lifetime event, surrounded by people who can help explain it and express how it makes you feel, it very well could be worth letting someone else take care of the essentials, allowing you to keep your eye on the sky. Pay-to-sleep-in-your-own-tent options abound across Eastern Oregon with similar prices, and nowhere near the high-class amenities.

## Get wild, get free

**What:** Backcountry camping, hiking

**Where:** Atop the 9,038-foot summit of Strawberry Mountain

Go early, beat the crowds and disappear into a wilderness area well before Eastern Oregon’s highways and byways begin to fill with vehicles. The Strawberry Mountains, located near Prairie City, are a rarely-visited, forested range with trails that bisect high mountain lakes and rugged, beautiful country.

Don’t expect to have it to yourself this August, when the eclipse passes almost directly overhead. But a taxing hike will discourage many drive-down-for-the-day eclipse seekers. And the top of Strawberry Mountain — the highest point in the range — is smack dab in the middle of the path of totality. It will offer one of the most unadulterated views of the eclipse in Oregon, and maybe the entire country. Nothing will distract the eye from horizon to horizon — a sunset in every direction as the moment of totality comes near.

The shortest way to the peak is 3.6 miles, if you park at the trailhead at the end of Forest Service Road 1640. Most hikers travel from Strawberry Campground, where the trek to the top is 6.5 miles. Another route is via Onion Creek, a distance of about 4.9 miles. Consult maps and pack plenty of water, and plan to arrive and leave days before and after the eclipse in order to beat the crowds that will surely fill those small, dusty forest roads on eclipse day. The Forest Service is expecting the road corridor to Strawberry Campground to be especially congested, and parking lots will be overflowing at every trailhead.

## The best view under the biggest sky

**What:** Oregon Star Party

**Where:** Indian Trail Spring outside Mitchell

Every year, professional and amateur astronomers from across the country gather in the Ochoco National Forest outside Mitchell for the Oregon Star Party. They choose the remote location because of its dark skies and unobstructed 360-degree horizon view.

But what makes the 5,000-foot butte perfect for viewing the dark night sky also makes it perfect for viewing the total solar eclipse, and 2017 is expected to be an absolute banner year for the annual event. The totality there will last for almost a minute and a half and — if we’re lucky enough for a clear blue Oregon day — the experience will be amazing. The surrounding sunsets will give way to totality, when the sun’s corona will be visible and the planets of Venus, Mars and Mercury will temporarily appear in the gathering dark. According to Star Party organizers, producers

of the IMAX film “Einstein’s Incredible Universe” are planning to send a team to film the incredible experience.

The bad news is that reservations are full up for the Star Party itself — meaning there are no more parking permits or RV spots. But the Ochoco is a national forest, and plenty of space nearby is available free and on a first-come, first-served basis.

Forest roads in the area will be plenty busy. A large music festival is taking place on Big Summit Prairie, which is expected to draw thousands to the forest all weekend. But approaching from the east, jumping on the Summit Road from, say, Forest Road 12 near Antone, you may find place to get a car off the road and a meadow to camp in and watch the unparalleled show.

But the same advice remains — go early, stay late, don’t fight the crowds.

## Just jump in the car and go

**What:** Finding a pullout or a parking lot in the totality zone

Many people were not lucky enough to reserve a campsite in the totality zone, are unable to shell out big bucks for a private event and cannot get a few days off work to allow them to beat the majority of the crowds.

But that does not mean those people are out of luck. If you wake up early on August 21, everyone in Eastern Oregon is close enough to be able to get into the totality zone by showtime — perhaps. But how best to do it safely and on time, and avoid the hassle that often accompanies overwhelming crowds?

Interstate 84 may be the best option, heading east toward Baker City. There are multiple public watch parties in Baker County that you could crash, including at Farewell Bend State Park, Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort, the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center and Sumpter Valley Dredge State Park. You could also just get off the highway in downtown Baker City, try to find an out-of-the-way place, put the tailgate down and look up. That may offer you the best chance of getting back on the road and over Cabbage Hill before the mass of people beats a retreat to where they came from.

There are other options for going south, however. From Pendleton you could head down Highway 395 toward John Day, which offers lots of opportunities to leave the highway into the surrounding hills within the totality zone. From Heppner you could travel on Highway 207 to Spray and Kimberly, where the small towns are prepping public space for paid camping and trying to attract visitors.

There are some serious unknowns when it comes to the ability to travel on the morning of the eclipse, and those unknowns are magnified in small towns and two-lane highways. Will it be able to handle the additional traffic, or will infrastructure be overwhelmed? No one is quite sure at this point — it could be a perfect spot off the radar of many eclipse seekers. Or you could find yourself stuck on Highway 207 behind a dozen out-of-gas out-of-staters, trying to find the sun through the sunroof.

There’s a lot of risk when it comes to traveling the day of the eclipse. It will work out for some, but likely not for many others. You’ll have to ask yourself if that’s a risk you’re willing to take. We wouldn’t recommend it.

# ROADS: Rep. Barreto didn’t support bill, didn’t get earmarks

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among other changes.

Bob Patterson, Pendleton public works director, said two other projects are eligible for state money: a Southwest Perkins Avenue extension from Southwest 18th Street to Tutuilla Road and a Northwest King Avenue extension from Northwest Horn Avenue to Northgate. Patterson said both projects would have opened up room for housing development.

Turner noted that House District 58 — which includes Pendleton, Union County and Wallowa County — received no earmarks while neighboring District 57 — which includes Hermiston, Milton-Freewater and Morrow County — secured more than \$32 million for road projects.

Turner, who lost to Barreto in the 2014 Republican primary, said Barreto didn’t have any leverage to include projects from his district to the package because

he voted against the bill.

In an interview Friday, Barreto admitted that’s the way the game is played in Salem.

Barreto said the Legislature’s joint transportation committee required support for the bill from the start in order to include projects from the legislators’ home districts in the package.

With important aspects of the bill like the gas tax rate “constantly morphing,” Barreto withheld his support and ultimately voted no.

“They didn’t need my vote and I didn’t give it to them,” he said.

Although local politicians in his district may have liked the transportation bill, Barreto said many constituents didn’t support the higher gas taxes and vehicle registration fees included in the bill.

Hansell, whose senate district encompasses both House districts in northeast Oregon, said he wasn’t involved in developing the bill, though he voted in favor because of the money it brought

to parts of his district.

District 57 is represented by another Republican, Greg Smith of Heppner, who sat on the transportation committee and voted for the bill.

Smith said he fought hard to include earmarks for projects in Hermiston, Milton-Freewater and Morrow County in the legislation.

“There are some legislators in the building who aren’t so pleased that so many dollars are going to my district, but I thought it was the right thing to do,” he said.

Smith said the package provided funding for projects that would spur economic development and growth in the region.

Those who helped craft the bill wielded more influence when projects were being added to the package, he said. It also helped that Smith is a senior member of the Legislature.

Both Smith and Barreto liked that cities and counties were getting more for road maintenance.

According to leaders on the

transportation committee, over the next decade Pendleton will see an average increase of \$426,000 per year for road improvements. Hermiston will get an additional \$448,000 per year.

Although any money for maintenance is helpful in a city with an aging street system, Patterson said the increase only meets about one-sixth of Pendleton’s needs.

That means the Pendleton city government will continue to look for local solutions to cover their transportation needs. Another idea being discussed by the city is putting a local gas tax measure on the ballot again. A 5-cent gas tax ballot measure was soundly rejected by voters in 2015.

Patterson said one idea was to propose a gas tax that would decrease each time the state or federal government increased their own gas taxes.

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# ECLIPSE: ODOT trains to push vehicles off road

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crews are getting trained on how to move those vehicles to a safer spot to keep traffic moving,” he said. But if roads are clogged, it will take road crews awhile to reach the scene.

While no one has firm numbers for how many people are coming to Oregon to see the first total solar eclipse in the state in 38 years, the Oregon Office of Emergency Management is planning on at least a million visitors. Strandberg said the transportation department is working on getting a “ballpark estimate of how many visitors are in an area.”

Permanent recorders on select sections of highways 26 and 395 allow the department to collect traffic data, he said. ODOT is using those recorders to see how many vehicles are entering and leaving eclipse viewing areas in Grant County, for example, to generate rough estimates of how many vehicles remain in the vicinity.

Strandberg also said the agency is beefing up its Trip Check website to show the pace of traffic through the rural highways.

“We’re trying to implement that before the eclipse, that’s the plan,” he said.

And the state is shutting down highway construction projects through the area starting the weekend before the eclipse through midnight Tuesday, Aug. 22, the day after.

ODOT’s motto for the event is “arrive early, stay put and leave late.”

“People coming the day of might be stuck in traffic jams,” Strandberg said, and a mass exodus the moment it ends will cause the same result.

He also said visitors need to come prepared.

“We expect gas stations to run out of gas, grocery stores to run out of food,” he said, and rest areas and restaurants to be full. “It’s quite an unusual situation, but we think it’s manageable.”

He warned drivers not to rely on GPS directions for rerouting around turtle-speed traffic. Strandberg said that would mean traveling over U.S. Forest Service roads and rough terrain. Not knowing those routes or having the right vehicle could mean trouble.

“People need to stay on the main highways,” he said. “That might be a long delay, but if you are on a forest road ... you might be stuck a lot longer.”

Umatilla County is not in the path of totality, but county emergency manager Tom Roberts said gaggles of tourists could end up here.

“We anticipate that the Hermiston-Pendleton area could be an overflow area for the folks who could not get a room or the space to park,” he said.

The county, he said, is in a better position than some to deal with tourists. The eclipse cuts its swath across the state after the Umatilla County Fair and before the Pendleton Round-Up. Those events have given local emergency services crucial experience dealing with big crowds.

Emergency planning for the possible rush continues, he said, with the sheriff’s office, local fire department and quick response teams considering if they should pre-stage resources along Highway 395, which spans the county north to south. And he’s working with the Umatilla Morrow Radio and Data District to ensure better communication capabilities in remote areas.

Roberts also said the Oregon Office of Emergency Management is treating the eclipse as a real-world opportunity to prepare for the Cascadia earthquake. During that catastrophe, people from the western side of the state are coming to Eastern Oregon. And the influx of eclipse tourists mimics that. Emergency officials plan to have an “after action review,” Roberts said, when they will weigh in on “what we think went right and what we think we can improve upon,” and apply those lessons to planning for Cascadia.

Roberts also flies the county’s emergency drone, which has been helpful during recent search and rescue missions and fires. Barring any emergency the day of the eclipse, he said it might be worth zipping the device into darkened skies and snapping a few photos.

After all, he said, this is a once in a lifetime event for many.

Local school districts consider the celestial spectacle a moneymaking opportunity. The Huntington School District off Interstate 84 in Baker County is offering 20-foot by 20-foot campsites for \$300 for three nights. And the Prairie City School District on Highway 26 in Grant County has 212 spaces its offering for three nights for \$150.

Prairie City superintendent Julie Gurczynski said the district has sold 45 sites, so there are spaces left. The proceeds first cover the costs of portable toilets and clean-up, she said, then go to teachers for classroom supplies, field trips and other items that are outside the district’s budget.

The district’s FFA and sports teams are serving dinner Sunday night and lunch Monday, and those revenues will help those organizations.

The district has 150 students in K-12. Gurczynski said the school board encouraged her to do as much as she could with the eclipse. The event will bring in money that helps with district fundraising, she said, and maybe put some in the bank.

She also said the community is nervous about how many people might come and the chaos that could bring, but locals are excited for visitors and the eclipse itself. District staff start back to work the day of the event, but Gurczynski said she plans on closing the office 9 a.m. to noon so she and employees can take experience when morning turns to night.