

Oregon's public lands could face the brunt of solar eclipse visitors

As many as a million visitors are expected

By Amanda Peacher
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Smith Rock State Park naturalist Dave Vick peered through his spotting scope perched on a red rock cliff. He pointed the scope toward a tall ponderosa pine, spotting a downy mass in the middle of a 6-foot-wide nest. Inside was a 2-week-old bald eagle, or eaglet, named Solo because he was the only hatchling in this year's brood.

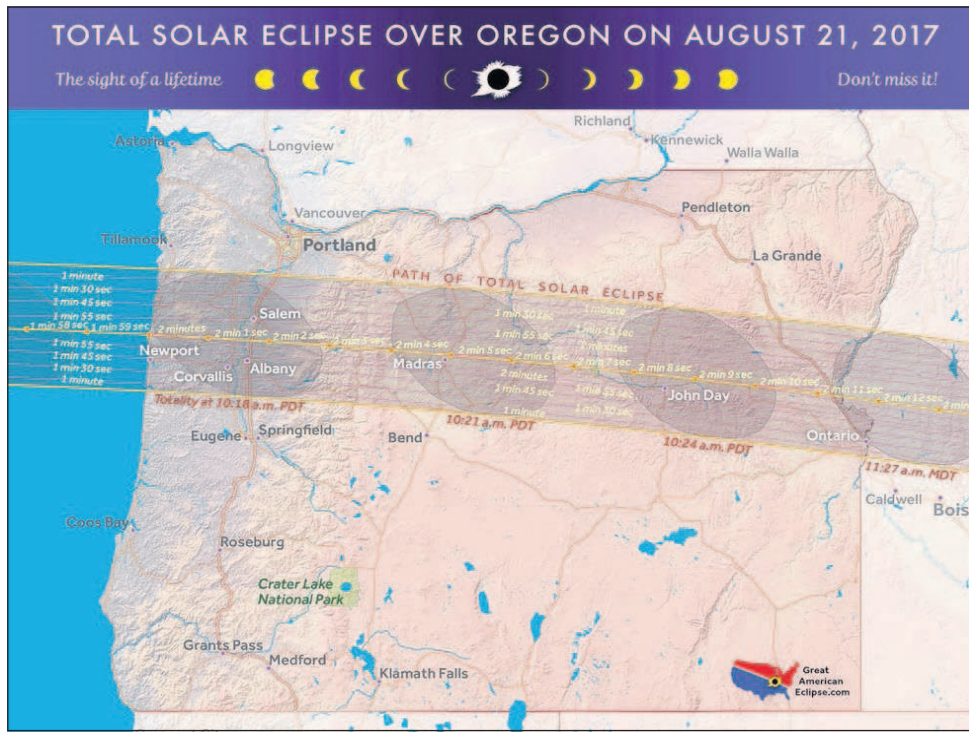
The floppy little bird was guarded by a stately adult bald eagle — one of the two in a nesting pair that lives here year-round. Solo then stared expectantly at the parent bird, opening his beak slightly.

It was a typical quiet, spring day for these raptors and the many other species in the park. But come August, Solo and the other park wildlife will experience a rare celestial event — a total solar eclipse that will travel across the entire midsection of Oregon. For two minutes, the park will go dark. Nocturnal creatures will stir, daytime animals will fall asleep, and the temperature will drop dramatically and suddenly.

Thousands of human visitors are expected to visit the state park, and many other wild places within the eclipse's path, to experience the rare event. And land managers are expecting still more people who want to experience the eclipse in a memorable, wild setting to flock to rivers, wilderness areas, mountain peaks and lakes.

Potential problems

All those people amount to a huge amount of planning for public lands agencies — and potential problems.



A total solar eclipse over Oregon happens on Aug. 21.

All reservable campsites at Smith Rock are booked for the eclipse. The same goes for pretty much every other state park, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management campsite, as well as cabins, vacation rentals and motels within the path of totality. With all bookable lodging taken, eclipse watchers are expected to spill over onto public lands to see the event. Estimates of as many as 1 million visitors means land managers are working hard to protect the many sensitive, wild places within the 70-mile belt of the eclipse.

That includes educating visitors on how to protect wildlife. In addition to bald eagles and other raptors at Smith Rock, there are river otters, nesting golden eagles, mule deer, snakes and more. Huge crowds of human visitors can interrupt critters that are hunting, sleeping or caring for their young.

"The biggest issue is just

stress for the wildlife," Vick said.

Land managers are concerned about potential damage to places like the John Day Fossil Beds, where one misstep can destroy irreplaceable fossils, and pristine spots within the Mount Jefferson Wilderness Area that could be overrun with illegal fires, trash and human waste.

Cash-strapped

Budget-strapped agencies like the Forest Service already face challenges with hiring an adequate number of wilderness rangers and law enforcement officers. Smith Rock State Park has only five full-time staffers plus a few volunteers. Rangers from other parks will be on site for the eclipse, but that's still just a handful of employees for thousands of visitors.

That equation will be about the same at Forest Service and BLM campgrounds, trails and dirt roads. And with the eclipse happening during

one of the hottest months of the year, there's one topic that comes up at every eclipse planning meeting: wildfire.

"The idea of evacuating all those people on a normal day in a fire is very frightening," Barnum said. "To think about it happening when there's double or triple volume of people in the park would be really, really terrifying."

To limit crowding, officials will close the road into the park once it's full. Latecomers will have to walk ½ mile or more to reach the entrance.

But despite all the extra work and necessary precautions that go into planning for a day like this, Barnum is excited to experience the eclipse in the place where she works.

"Smith Rock is definitely a very special place," Barnum said. "If we can preserve it and give people an amazing experience watching the eclipse when they come out here, that's pretty cool. It makes me feel good about what we do."

Celebrating 50 years of public beaches

Beach from Page 1A

'Unique opportunity'

Major players in the tourism industry, such as soon-to-be chairman of Travel Oregon Ryan Snyder and Oregon Coast Visitors Association Executive Director Marcus Hinz, also came to celebrate the bill that supports Oregon's tourism industry.

"This is important because the ethos of this bill is built into our public coast brand," Hinz said. "These public beaches present a unique opportunity. We have to balance economic development and responsibility, and we are taking the long view approach to doing that (in Oregon)."

Other festivities of the day included a beach bike demo, a sandcastle-building demonstration and a performance from The Weather Machine, a band who recorded songs inspired by travels up the entire Oregon Coast.

"This is a celebration about saving the beach," Chamber of Commerce Executive Director and key organizer Court Carrier said. "What if the beach would have been privatized? Can you imagine not being able to walk along the beach? This bill is probably the reason why this visitor economy exists on the coast."

Beach memories

Mayor Sam Steidel was in the third grade when Gov. McCall visited Cannon Beach.

"I remember seeing the helicopter," Steidel said. "I know that the governor was there, and I remember some men in some suits, but mostly I remember the helicopter."

While some of the details of that day were fuzzy, a Cannon Beach where people couldn't walk along the dry sand is simply one Steidel said he can't imagine.

"The beach — it's in our name," he said.



COLIN MURPHEY/EO MEDIA GROUP

The Beach Bill keeps Oregon's beaches open to everyone.

Committed to the cause

McCall remembers the day his dad flew to Cannon Beach, but in the way most people probably did.

"I saw it on TV," McCall laughed. "That was business. We were his family. I didn't realize the significance at the time of what he did — he was just my dad."

But the event nevertheless had an impact on him. He joined the U.S. Navy in 1967, where he started his 50-year career championing environmental protection in the military. In 2003, he moved to the U.S. Army as a consultant to develop the first major federal agency commitment to sustainability.

He joined in a time where environmentalists and those in the military clashed about the role of pollution in military exercises.

Today he still works in this field as a program manager for the Institute for Renewable Natural Resources at Texas A&M University.

"(My father) influenced me a lot. He taught me you can bring these parties together," he said. "When people are angry, that's when you reach out to bring them together."

As for speaking in the inclement weather? Just another testament to Oregonian's commitment to the beach, he said.

"It wouldn't have been the same any other way."

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