

The Eclipse Chasers

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A steady spring rain on the windows...perfect trout fishing weather I thought as I surfaced from the shallows of R.E.M. sleep. The rain would flush food into the tamarack-stained waters above Washburn Falls, whetting the appetites of the browns and brookies in the deep pools below.

I opened my eyes expecting cabin paneling but saw dark blue vinyl instead.

It came to me with a jolt.

This wasn't Florence County in Northern Wisconsin, this was the Big Island in Hawaii. My wife Pam and I were sleeping in a rented LeMans on the shoulder of the Queen Kaahumanu Highway near an official scenic overlook some 18 miles north of Kailua Kona. It was 4:30 a.m., Thursday, July 11, 1991, the day of the total solar eclipse, and the rain was falling in sheets.

Rain? A car ripped by and then another. To the south, I could see a stream of watery headlights coming our way despite the fact that partiality was to begin in less than two hours and it was raining, almost hard, where we were.

Each of our previous four mornings on Hawaii, we had risen early to check the weather at our hotel, the open-air Kona Hilton. With the exception of completely overcast skies on Monday, July 8, the mornings were pretty much the same: fog and clouds reaching up to the chest of the 8,271 foot Mount Hualalai to the east and then hazy blue skies to the zenith. Residents said the fog and haze (known locally as "vaze" and "vog") were powered by the Kilauea volcano on the southeastern end of the island. Most likely we would see totality through the vaze from the Hilton, but just as probably we would miss the onset of partiality. We were greedy. We wanted it all.

On three of the mornings, we traveled up the Queen's Highway to check out what meteorologists were calling the "clearest weather" zone, a drumstick-shaped area that followed the road to the northeast between Kailua Kona and Waimea. The largely clear, even vaze-free skies we encountered over the zone's black-brown lava fields convinced us the experts were right. This was the place to be on eclipse day. And now we were about smack in the middle of the zone in a persistent Hawaiian rain.

I looked across the wide highway and saw the Mobil engineer from Houston we had met the night before flick on his dome light. He had come to Hawaii alone, evaluated the situation carefully, picked the same spot as us and now was fumbling with his map. Pam was stirring as I ran across the road and rapped on his car window. "What do you think?" "This stinks!" "Yeah." "Heard any weather reports?" "They're saying it'll clear up." (The warm rain was starting to soak through my Halley's Comet sweatshirt.) "You staying?" "I think so."

Back across the road to Pam's sleepy but distinctly dubious expression. Pam liked the idea of seeing a total eclipse almost as much as she liked where this eclipse would occur, America's paradise, the Big Island.

By 5:00 a.m., the rain had diminished to occasional drops, and people emerged from the hundreds of vehicles that were parked nose to tail along the road. Everyone looked up in horror at the seemingly motionless clouds. The knot of people we had become acquainted with the night before—the pair of Air Force men from Honolulu, two brothers who had traveled thousands of miles from opposite directions to rendezvous here, a young couple from California, and the Mobil engineer—pulled together again to evaluate the situation. Just then a radio station came on with a cheerful “aloha” followed by a weather report. The announcer said it was partly cloudy on the western part of the island near Kailua Kona (where our hotel was) and more clouds were moving in and that it was raining on the northwestern coast (where we were) but it would stop soon and clear skies were expected.

As the eastern horizon lightened with the rising sun, the clouds indeed looked patchier than they had just a half hour before. We all felt an uneasy sort of relief and decided to stay put. The overlook was ideal because its panoramic views would allow us to see the Moon's shadow racing toward us across the Pacific and away from us up and over towering Mauna Kea.

Over the next hour telescopes, cameras, binoculars, and other apparatus sprouted on tripods and observers in the areas between the cars and on the hills lining the road. The sun rose at about 6:00 a.m. but the ubiquitous mirror-like “sun peeps” everyone wore to protect their eyes reflected only shades of gray. The weather dominated discussion and again and again came the question: “Do you think we'll see the start of partiality?” The weather reports kept saying yes, but you had to trust your eyes and your experience and it didn't look good.

At about 6:30 a.m. excited D.J.'s could be heard heralding the onset of partiality at various locations around the island. They spoke so quickly and used so many unfamiliar names that we had a hard time pinpointing where these reports were coming from. All we were seeing was a slightly brighter pewter spot where the sun was trying to pierce the clouds.

Twenty minutes into partiality and still no sun, only lazy gray skies and slate-gray anxiety. Stay or chase? Pam and I thought it looked clearer to south and decided to cut and run, telling our eclipse friends that we were going to drive until we found sunshine. We did not intend to be skunked by the weather. They remained confident the skies would clear at the overlook, and no one followed as we pulled away. About three miles down the road to the south, I felt a hot spot on my arm just as Pam blurted out that she could see it in her sun peep! We went about a mile farther, stopped the car and scrambled onto the trunk lid with our binoculars and peeps.

It was 7:00 a.m. and about one half of the sun was shadowed. With the moon descending from north to south, what remained looked like a bright and optimistic grin in our peeps. Glancing at the sun without mylar protection revealed in the moon's subtly bumpy silhouette, the most inky, velvety, and utter blackness either of us had ever seen. The eclipse was already magnificent, and the best was yet to come. We marveled at partiality for about five minutes and then the clouds slammed across our view like a stainless steel door. The whole world groaned. We looked south where it appeared even cloudier. To the north, our first location by the scenic overlook now looked clearer. They don't call us eclipse chasers for nothing we said, climbing back in the car and zooming north, but the clouds had the same idea.

We passed the scenic overlook at 55 and noticed our old spot was still socked in. The sprawling valley up to the next rise about a mile and half north was also dark. Way in the distance, however, on the second rise, about 5 miles away, I caught a flash off a solar filter—a mirrored signal to a place in the sun.

Within seven minutes, we were again reclining against the back window with the grinning sun rising slowly in a tall and wide window of blue. Home free we thought as the sun became thinner and thinner and finally pursed its lips into a fiery spot. The diamond ring! I couldn't resist dropping my peep for a brilliant naked eye glance that will forever remain burned into my mind.

The diamond was like a new star; the brightest, most magnificent star imaginable. It was a ten times brighter Sirius. The ring itself was shaped by the black circle of the moon backlighted ever so slightly by the emerging corona. Neither of us nor anyone we talked with subsequently saw Baily's beads. Very quickly, the diamond shrank and blinked out. Totality! Instantaneously, the gentle explosion of the corona. (If there is a heavenly light, it is the uniquely glorious color and opalescence of the corona!) Astonishment! Cheers! Goose bumps! Shortness of breath!

The sky was thunderhead purple and green and looked like an inverted bowl resting on a narrow collar of silvery dawn. The black hole of totality was visible just below the down-side-up center of the bowl's bottom. Up was down and down was up but never before had we seen anything as majestic, beautiful, and hopeful as this. It was a sign or a symbol, I thought, of what I still cannot say, but it has me thinking.

Although I have read countless descriptions of totality and seen countless pictures, nothing comes close to capturing the dazzling glory of it falling directly into the human eye and mind. My heart began to pound. Pam and I felt that you could almost hear a deep organ chord. It was as if collective consciousness was programmed to fill our ears with cosmic music at this most spectacular sight.

I looked through my 7 x 50 binoculars and immediately saw two huge, fishhook-shaped prominences rising from each of sun's poles. They were hot, nearly neon-pink with a dash of orange. My mind boggled at the thought that the shanks alone were wider than the Earth. People were literally gasping all around us. The gasps became deathly groans when the wind shifted and clouds began filling the bottom of the bowl, blotting out the corona first and then covering the abyss itself.

We kept watching in the dusky darkness and hoped the clouds would part as priceless seconds ticked into minutes, but finally and very quickly, as if someone had toggled a switch, the light came up behind the bank of gray and we knew totality was over. We hugged and kissed and applauded and hooted and yelled and all the people around us did the same. With the passing of totality, the mouth of the sun, now a deepening frown, was bright enough to be seen through the frustrating clouds.

We decided to rejoin our friends at the scenic overlook and headed south again down the highway. On the way back I asked Pam if 45 seconds of totality was worth the thousands of miles we had traveled, the thousands of dollars we had spent, and the depressing helplessness we had felt when the clouds rolled in? Yes. Would you like to see another? Yes. Was it better than the paradise that is Hawaii? Yes.

Both of us intimately understood why people become eclipse chasers. One is not enough, neither probably is twenty.

Back at the scenic overlook we were told most of totality had been visible through thin clouds. Superlatives crackled, but no one felt the experience could be expressed in words. You simply have to see it. As partiality ended, someone opened Bryan Brewer's book *Eclipse* to a chart of future eclipse paths, and we all gathered round to start planning for the North American annular due in May, 1994, and the South American total due in November, 1994.

On the way back to town, the thought "there is nothing under the sun like the sun under the moon" looped through my mind like an ancient chant, and it will no doubt continue echoing there for a long, long time.

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