

On Eclipses: A Personal Response

Letter to the Editor

Maida Barton Follini

Regarding Martin Beech's article, 'Facts, Truth and Signalling to Mars', and his discussion of the interest in eclipses in 1932 (Nancy: 'I suppose you've come to the Arctic to watch an eclipse?' she asks Dick) ...

My family (father, mother, two brothers and I) drove from Connecticut to Fryeburg, Maine, to see the total solar eclipse of August 31, 1932. I must admit that while I was present, I didn't make much of the experience, as I was only two years old. The only thing I remember about the trip was wading in a shallow pond - it must have been hot in August, and I suppose we all cooled off this way! But my oldest brother at age 8 must have been very excited. This was the start of his long-held interest in astronomy.

It was not until the total solar eclipse of July 20, 1963, that I really saw an eclipse. I was in grad school in Worcester, Massachusetts, and I invited three fellow grad students to come with me up to Maine and see the eclipse. We drove up one day, arriving near Belfast (Maine) at night, and next day took my boat (I had a heavy oak wooden lifeboat with an outboard, tied up at the public dock on Islesboro at the time) - and motored along the Islesboro coast to Ram Island. The solar eclipse was to occur the next day, July 20. After some fishing by the fellows and some swimming and relaxing by myself and my female guest, we had a good night's sleep to prepare for eclipse watching. Next day we stood on a bare sheet of rock above the shore, where we would have a good view of the sun and the moon's shadow. Gradually the nice sunny day turned greyer, as if clouds had appeared - but the sky was cloudless. We could see, through several layers of dark photographic negatives, a bite taken out of the sun, which slowly enlarged until the whole sun was covered. Now the day was dark grey, as if dusk had fallen. It never got wholly dark, but the birds had stopped singing, and all was quiet. There was a certain dull dark grey to the atmosphere, just as in the gloaming after the sun has set, there is a grey pause before black night arrives. Complete blackness did not come, and after a while the shadow on the sun began moving away. First a shining bead, then a larger arc of light, then brightness returned to the earth. And all at once the birds began singing and fluttering around and moving again. The false night was over, and they cheered the return of the sun.

It was very similar to the report of a 10-year-old boy, Paul Holmes, who had observed the eclipse of 1932: He wrote, many years later, to the local Plaistow, New Hampshire Historical Society:

It slowly began to light as the moon journeyed across the sun. Roosters began to crow like their early morning call to the chickens. Birds began to sing, like the morning robins out early for the worms before sunrise. ...I have retained that moment of striking events after all these years.

Eclipse-watching had occurred even earlier in Maine. On October 27, 1780, a total eclipse was scheduled to occur across the Island of Islesboro, Maine, at that time occupied by British forces, for it was in the middle of the American Revolution. A scientific expedition was sent from Harvard University to observe and describe the eclipse. Samuel Williams, who was Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy at Harvard, negotiated safe passage through the British lines to perform scientific observations of the eclipse. Williams was able to bring back a description of the eclipse which has been included in the *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* for the year 1783.

It was certainly agreeable of the British commanders on Islesboro to allow the American scientists to come through their lines. The British had just won a battle in Penobscot Bay against a large American force, capturing or sinking 40 American vessels, and driving the American marines and soldiers to a retreat into the forests. So I suppose the British did not fear a group of civilian scientists from Harvard!

TARS writer Martin Beech was right on target when he references the interest that is always taken in rare solar eclipses, both by scientists and by the general public.

Swallows & Amazons Forever!