

## Eclipse fever strikes Oregon universities, schools seize 'unique educational opportunity'

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In 1979, high schooler Stephen Thorsett walked to the top of a hill behind his parents' house in Salem to take in the total solar eclipse through a cloudy winter sky.

February being February in Oregon's Willamette Valley, it was a mixed bag. He didn't get to fully see the magic moment when the moon completely shrouds the sun. But he remembered the excitement.

"It's just a cool once in a lifetime experience," he said in an interview.

Thirty-eight years later, Thorsett is an astrophysicist and again lives in Salem, this time as president of Willamette University. He'll have a second chance to see a total solar eclipse on Aug. 21. This time, Thorsett is hoping for warm weather, clear skies, and a primetime seat.

He's excited for the thrill of watching the shadow of the moon race across the ground and feel the August air cool once the sun is briefly covered.

He won't be alone this time. Willamette will host what it says is the largest gathering of solar scientists in the path of the 2017 eclipse. Hundreds of researchers are expected, and the school has several days of events planned. Thorsett says he has no idea how many people will be on campus.

Crowds could number from 400 or 500 to "maybe a few thousand."

Willamette isn't the only university in the path of totality. Oregon State and Western Oregon universities are also gearing up for eclipse crowds. The schools are using the opportunity to bring in experts on solar events and to introduce visitors to the campuses.

OSU hired a temporary staffer to coordinate the activities.

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Jill Peters, the OSU eclipse planner, said the state's largest university will be holding educational talks in Corvallis, handing out thousands of eclipse glasses and conducting research with high altitude balloons from its research vessel dozens of miles off the coast from Newport.

"That high-altitude balloon will be capturing the very first images of the eclipse," she said.

OSU is renting out more than 840 dorm rooms to accommodate about 1,800 eclipse travelers. Peters said she's spoken to people traveling from Australia and Colombia to the campus.

"I've never talked to people who are so excited about coming to an event," she said.

The school is using proceeds from the room rentals to pay for Peters' temporary position and other eclipse-related costs.

OSU mascot Benny the Beaver has been at county fairs across the state handing out eclipse glasses. Peter said the school has about 12,000 glasses it will hand out in the coming weeks.

The school projects a crowd of around 6,000 on campus.

In Monmouth, 20 miles north on Oregon 99W, Western Oregon officials are expecting more than 1,000 guests.

Western rented out more than 1,200 dorm rooms and is allowing 130 campers and 25 RVs on campus.

Western is partnering with the town of Independence, which is hosting several days of educational activities and cultural events centered around the eclipse. The school will provide a shuttle to and from campus.

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"It is such a unique educational opportunity," said Erin McDonough, Western's executive director of strategic communications.

McDonough said the university's largest event is typically commencement day, but officials are projecting thousands of people flooding the town in the days before the eclipse.

The state is bracing for more than 1 million tourists with the predictable impact on traffic. McDonough, who lives in Salem, said congestion could be comparable to commencement day combined with Oregon and Oregon State home football games and a snowstorm.

"I'm going to bike that day," McDonough said.

Back at Willamette, the school is juggling eclipse excitement with the return of thousands of undergraduate students two days later. Campus staff will have to clean hundreds of dorm rooms in the span of 48 hours.

On Monday morning, Thorsett expects to mingle with alums and visiting scientists before settling in for the show. "By the time of totality, it doesn't really matter where I am," he said, "I will be looking the same place everyone else."

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