

Day 4: I only got about an hour of sleep, as I had bumps throughout my body and the itch was unbearable. I didn't know if it was from mosquitoes or the water I was drinking. I took some medication in the AM, knowing this day will be a tough one, as we had to make our way back up to Phillips Ridge, meaning we had to boulder hop, and go up the Carter drop. It had to be at least 30 degrees, and I usually take heat well, but this day, with fatigue, medication, and a tough hike with a heavy backpack, I felt I had hit the wall—the point where physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion kicks in. As a team we decided we would find a cool area and rest. We found snow and I took my boots and socks off and put my feet in the snow. I felt my body temperature lower, which was good. We rested for a good half hour and carried on to our campsite, another hour away. I was tired but made it. This day was my 41st wedding anniversary, the first time in 41 years Gerry and I were not celebrating together. I gave thanks for having a wonderful and caring husband.

Totality

By [Mike Nash](#), Caledonia Ramblers

On July 10, 1972 I flew to Nova Scotia to see a total eclipse of the sun, an event featured in Carly Simon's greatest hit song released later that year. I had to reach Antigonish, 200 kilometres northeast of Halifax, but sadly I had neglected to reserve a car at the airport. After a mad dash downtown (the wrong direction) in a futile attempt to find an alternative rental, there was insufficient time to reach the zone of totality and I settled for the cultural experience of watching a 95 per cent partial eclipse from the ramparts of the historic Halifax Citadel.

My appetite whetted by this close encounter, I set my sights on the February 26, 1979 total eclipse that was to pass directly over central Canada. However, life intervened and in the spring of 1978 I moved west to Prince George. The zone of totality in 1979 would first pass over the U.S. northwest before crossing into the Canadian prairies, but it was in the depths of my first winter in north central British Columbia and the logistics weren't simple. As I was considering my options, an opportunity arose instead to take a week-long avalanche course at the same time as the eclipse. Sponsored by BC's Provincial Emergency Program, it was taught by future FMCBC northern director, George Evanoff. Once again I had missed a total eclipse, but I gained valuable mountain experience and met an individual who was to become a close friend for nearly two decades until his accidental death in 1998 (*The Mountain Knows No Expert*, Dundurn, 2009). After the 1979 event, the next opportunity to see a total eclipse in the continental U.S. would not occur for nearly 40 years, so it was soon out of mind.

Fast forward to last year when I realized that the 2017 total solar eclipse was getting close. It would track through Oregon, Idaho and Wyoming as it traversed the U.S. from coast to coast for the first time in nearly a century. A trip to see the eclipse could also be tied with a visit to some of the great national parks in the region. The catch was that millions of like-minded people would also be heading to the centreline of what was being dubbed 'The Great American Eclipse,' potentially doubling the populations of Idaho and Wyoming. Indeed, by early August parts of Idaho had already declared a state of emergency for eclipse day in anticipation of the influx of vehicles from neighbouring states.

I began serious planning in January 2017 and quickly found that accommodation in prime locations was either nonexistent or astronomically priced for the eve of the eclipse. My wife and I planned to camp for most of our trip, but we wanted assured accommodation and the chance to freshen up on the night before eclipse day. The answer was to stage the eclipse from Montana within a two-hour drive of the zone of totality in Idaho. I found a moderately-priced motel in the small town of Dillon on Interstate-15, and it was good that I had booked well ahead because by August the few remaining motel rooms in Dillon were going for many times the price that I had paid.

Day 5: I felt so much better. I still had the itch but got some well-needed sleep. We packed up and were off by 7:30 am. It seemed we were racing down, making it in under 4 hours, but those 77 switchbacks that we did 5 days earlier seemed no easier. The van was there waiting for us, and as Gerry says, the best view is when you see your vehicle (I had to agree on this one). We all went swimming in Buttle Lake and went out for a late lunch. It felt good to eat something other than freeze dried foods, and bars and nuts! We did close to 60k and close to 6000m of elevation gain over these 5 days. It was a journey I will forever be grateful for doing. Thanks to my team of Ray, Brian, and Carol. You were all amazing. ■



Snapshot of the sun's corona during the one-and-a-half minutes of totality in Dubois, Idaho.

In early August we were ready for the adventure, but another challenge loomed with record high temperatures, an extended drought, unprecedented wildfires and pervasive smoke throughout much of our intended travel route. As it turned out, this had an upside as campfire bans were in effect everywhere we went, except (strangely) in Yellowstone National Park. This meant that air quality in most campsites was paradoxically better than usual, and campers tended to turn in early with no fires to party around. *Park managers please take note!*

Our three-week, 4,700-kilometre odyssey took us through BC, Alberta, Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. We camped in a dozen different provincial, state and national parks and recreation sites in both Canada and the U.S., enjoying unprecedented hot, dry weather. We were mostly successful in dodging smoke from the pervasive wildfires. All, that is, except for a fishing access campsite on the Blackfoot River in central Montana when we found ourselves in the midst of three wildfires raining ash on the tent and wondering what, if any, evacuation protocols existed. Fortunately the wind direction changed and things settled down for the night.

Arriving in Dillon the next afternoon, the local gas stations were experiencing possibly their busiest day ever as travelers, reacting to news reports of Idaho potentially running out of gas and other essentials, were filling up. Most motel guests were keen to leave at the crack of dawn on eclipse day and the desk clerk obligingly started breakfast service early at 5 a.m., remarking "...it's just like hunt'n season!"

On the road at 6:30 a.m., we stopped shy of our intended eclipse centreline target early on the morning of Monday, August 21 in deference to traffic reports of unprecedented numbers of vehicles flowing into Idaho from Utah to the south. We found ourselves sharing a large interstate rest stop, already well inside the path of totality in the small community of Dubois, Idaho with many like-minded eclipse seekers. Settling in for a three-hour wait, the time passed quickly as we found ourselves engaged with the festive crowd. As the moment of totality approached in the high desert landscape, the temperature dropped, our surrounds became eerily dark and the chatter of several thousand people gradually quietened in awed anticipation. It was quite unlike any crowd event that I had ever attended.

The partial phase of the eclipse began at around 10:30 MDT and slowly deepened for an hour until at 11:30 a.m. what remained of the sun suddenly blinked out and was replaced by a black disk surrounded by the solar corona streaming away and a few brighter stars and planets visible. All around us the dreamlike background chat was accentuated by unrestrained gasps and exclamations, some of them my own. Through binoculars (safe only during totality) ruby red Earth-sized prominences stood out against the white solar corona. After a minute and a half of totality, a tiny part of the sun reappeared in a dazzling display of the 'diamond

ring,' the best in decades according to one newspaper report. I found myself in full agreement with the maxim that when it comes to viewing a solar eclipse, *totality changes everything!*

After chatting with the local Sheriff who was patrolling the site on a dirt bike, we took an unpaved backroad from Dubois directly into Yellowstone National Park to avoid post-eclipse traffic congestion. By mid-afternoon we found ourselves sitting with a different crowd of thousands waiting for another of nature's grand shows, the 'Old Faithful' geyser. Two of the great spectacles of nature within the space of just four hours.

On our way to the eclipse, we drove over the famous 'Going to the Sun Highway' in Montana's Glacier National Park, which seemed entirely appropriate to the trip's theme. We returned there a week later on the journey home, camping at Avalanche Creek for three nights on the west side of the park and using the free shuttle to access several of the mountain hikes from the same highway. We enjoyed magnificent scenery and saw plenty of wildlife, including black and grizzly bears, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, elk and deer.

Together with the booming U.S. economy, low gas prices, and sunny weather, the eclipse helped raise U.S. National Park attendance to unprecedented levels. Glacier, for example, exceeded a million visitors for the first time in July, and our arrival back there on August 24 coincided with the last day of the US National Park Service's centennial year and was celebrated with free park admission. North of the border, Parks Canada's free annual pass boosted visits to the Canadian Rocky Mountain parks. Yet it was gratifying in this burgeoning era of park reservations that there are still enough drop-in campsites to facilitate an impromptu trip through these iconic natural areas during the peak season. And if you haven't yet experienced totality (it took me more than 71 years) I urge you to look for a chance to do so. It is truly one of life's great experiences and cannot adequately be expressed in words or images. The next opportunity to see a total solar eclipse in North America will be on April 8, 2024, less than seven years away! ■



Judy Lett

Tunnel on the 'Going to the Sun' highway in Montana's Glacier National Park.