

# ECLIPSE

## ◀FROM 1A

them.

But no matter how much planning towns and cities do, the unexpected and irrational loom.

“Every day for the past 61 years, the sun has come up, went across the sky, and went down here in my world,” Carhenge manager Kevin Howard said, voice quivering a bit as he spoke. “It has done that every stinking day. Now, all of a sudden, when the sun gets here, it is going to go out. How am I going to react to that?”

Planted north of Alliance, around 1987, Carhenge — a roadside attraction inhabited by pigeons, snakes and an owl — has risen up rankings as perhaps the prime viewing spot for this American eclipse. Its encircled gray-painted hulks sit about four hours northeast of Denver, in a place at the edge of the Great Plains where clear skies are almost certain when the moon slips in front of the sun on Aug. 21. The sun will stay blocked for 2 minutes and 30 seconds, about as long as anywhere along the eclipse path.

Scientists from Antarctica, an unnamed billionaire and politicians led by Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts are among the estimated 25,000 coming to Carhenge. Wealthy flyers slated to land on the town runway have exceeded a cap, so no more aircraft can fit. Two buses will bring eclipse chasers from Belgium, and another will bring travelers from France. The five motels in Alliance, population 8,500, have been booked full for months, prompting 30 or so homeowners to offer rooms on Airbnb. A NASA-backed white balloon hovering 100,000 feet above Carhenge will shoot video and photos of the shadow.

Eclipse chasing will diversify an already global flow of celestial searchers, Americana connoisseurs and car buffs who contemplate the Ford Fairlane, Cadillac DeVille, Plymouth DeSoto, Oldsmobile 88s, Galaxies, Valiants and a Gremlin.

“Why do people go to Stonehenge? It’s kind of a magical, mystical place. It gives something for people to puzzle over, like the Yeti monster. Some of that has rubbed off on Carhenge,” said Jim Reinders, 89, who created it, inspired by his time as a petroleum engineer during the 1970s in London near Stonehenge.

“And, of course, automobiles are very much a part of America,” he said.

Police are bracing for gridlock, depending on cloud patterns east and west of the Sandhills.

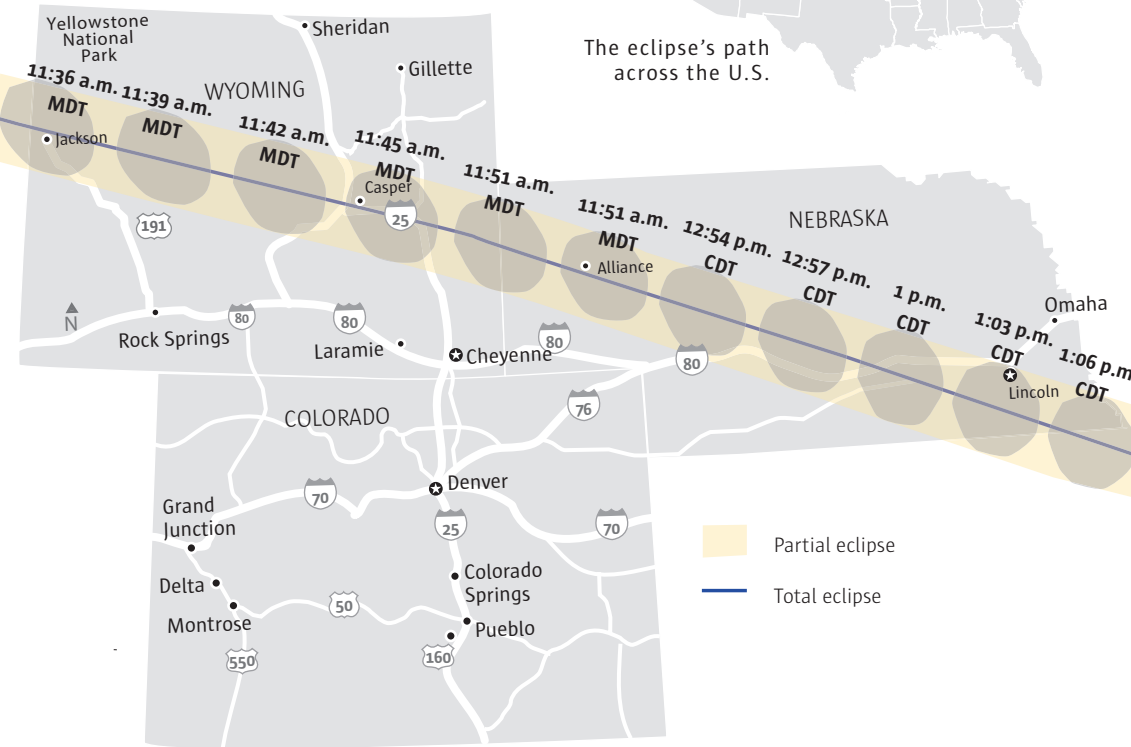
This eclipse is expected to demonstrate, more than any other recent celestial event (a total solar eclipse happens somewhere about every 18 months), the increasing migration of people to be in the shadow when the moon blocks the sun. A crimson-fringed black orb forms, revealing wispy golden tendrils of hot gas and particles from explosions.

Eclipse watchers cry, scream and — unable to find the right words — utter expletives, according to University of Colorado astronomer Doug Duncan, who has seen and recorded six eclipses and studies the modern phenomena as director of CU’s Fiske Planetarium.

Then, many become addicted. Of the millions of people who see each total eclipse, 10 percent to 20 percent are compelled to see more of them, Duncan said. An industry emerged in the 1990s catering to needs for charter flights

### THE SHADOW’S PATH

The solar eclipse on Aug. 21 will be the most accessible in modern history, sending a 67-mile-wide path of darkness across the U.S. The path of totality is expected to be especially crowded in Wyoming and Nebraska, where the skies on August mornings are almost always clear.



#### Towns and cities in the U.S. path of totality

About 12 million people live in the area where the Aug. 21 total eclipse will cast a shadow — a 67-mile-wide path from Oregon to South Carolina. Several cities and four state capitals sit within this path of totality.

STATE CAPITAL	POPULATION
Madras City, Ore.	Carbondale, Ill.
6,729	26,179
Idaho Falls, Idaho	Paducah, Ky.
60,211	25,145
Casper	Nashville, Tenn.
59,324	660,388
Lincoln, Neb.	Clayton, Ga.
280,364	2,266
Jefferson City, Mo.	Columbia, S.C.
43,013	134,309



At Allen Setter's barber shop in Alliance, Neb., the talk of the town is the Aug. 21 solar eclipse. *RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post*

out over oceans to islands — indulging eclipse-chasing passions. People invariably freak out, possibly related to animals freaking out, he said. Winds shift. Birds and bats swirl as skies darken in the middle of day. Planets pop out, followed by stars. Flowers close. Crickets sing. Temperatures plummet up to 20 degrees.

“It looks like the end of the world, like nothing you’ve ever seen or will see again. It is so intense,” Duncan said. “Every total eclipse, the hair on the back of my neck stands up.”

It’ll be easier than ever to sit outside the path and watch the moon shadow on websites.

NASA images from Carhenge, combined with video streams and photos from 54 other balloons over the path of totality, will feed those

online postings. This will continue the turn of humanity in the interconnected, yet lonely, 21st century toward virtual experience.

But for residents of Alliance, with its brick streets and 1880s buildings, the eclipse is emerging as a tangible and overwhelming reality requiring wide preparations. And, in an isolated rural town, mobilizing for a deluge of unknown guests is done with a sense of duty.

The crowd will include visitors who think nothing of paying as much as \$10 for a hamburger, Solar Eclipse Task Force co-chairperson Becci Thomas told residents last week at a final prep session. But merchants must not gouge, she said, repeating a civic warning leaders have been repeating for months.

#### Resources for your last-minute eclipse viewing trip

**eclipse2017.nasa.gov**  
NASA is running an eclipse website

**weather.gov**  
National Weather Service cloud cover information

**NCIS.org**  
Probability of seeing the eclipse at various sites based on weather forecasts

Source: NASA  
Kayla Robertson, *The Denver Post*

“This is your chance to shine,” she said. “You’re having company. Be as nice as you can.”

It started in 2013 with a phone call from Russia. The guy was asking about accommodations for something celestial involving the sun when it would be straight overhead.

Then came more calls from Europe, Asia and Africa, claiming Alliance sits right on the path.

In 2014, town leaders formed the Solar Eclipse Task Force.

At first, “people were like, ‘Really? Why is this such a big deal?’” said Chelsie Herian, director of the local economic development office.

Then, visiting physicist Peggy Norris, up from the Sanford Underground Research Lab in South Dakota (she regularly works a mile down), told local leaders the eclipse would be “Sturgis for stargazers.”

The annual Sturgis motorcycle rally, about a three-hour drive north of Alliance, brings an annual rumbling of nearly 750,000 riders.

Norris has traveled to 14 total eclipses, including one in the Arctic at minus-20 degrees, and reckons humans’ emotional response derives from ancestral fears the sun won’t come back. Her explanation hit home in Alliance.

“Now we’re getting 30 calls a day,” said Herian, who took notes as the task force of 50 key local players met every month for three years.

They’ve worked out seemingly everything. Hospital staffers said they’ve stocked up on hydration salts and antivenom for snake bites. Farmers are mobilizing to handle parking and camping. An extra dozen or so State Patrol Troopers have deployed to the Sandhills with three aircraft tracking traffic. To let people know what is happening, KCOW 1400 AM radio’s representative promised to broadcast anything important on the air, despite a corporate push to drive listeners to a website.

A mobile planetarium will prep children.

And Alliance coordinators are basing all plans on the assumption internet access will break down due to lack of capacity. Mobile phone reception, even with no eclipse, is spotty in the Sandhills. The worst-case scenarios incorporate difficulty finding fuel, eclipse chasers running out of water, and faltering electricity as too many people charge cameras and smartphones (even though these may not work). Mayor Fred Yeager said Alliance can turn on a backup diesel generator system if necessary.

Residents received messages advising them to buy groceries early so stores can stock up fully,

and to top off their gas tanks and an extra 5-gallon lawn mower jug ahead of the eclipse.

So much depends when diverse people meet “on who has the sandwiches,” said Jane Potts, a former teacher organizing an International Welcome Center in Alliance’s Knight Museum and Sandhills Center. (Hundreds of food vendors bound for Alliance have the benefit of the region’s sole state health inspector being gone on vacation.)

The welcome center hosts will serve tea, free, to international travelers Saturday and Sunday before Monday’s eclipse. A legion of volunteer cooks around town committed to bake 1,600 oatmeal, snickerdoodle and chocolate chip cookies for each day.

Potts lined up interpreters speaking French, German, Russian, Japanese and Korean. The visitors will bring different perspectives on the U.S., President Donald Trump and world affairs.

But the growing human fascination with eclipses, Potts said, “is more who we are than our governments.”

Some problems couldn’t be solved. State transportation crews tore up U.S. 385 south of Alliance, a main route, as part of the 29-year-old Heartland Expressway construction project. Town leaders negotiated a deal to knock off construction before and after the eclipse.

The town’s brick main street also is ripped up for sidewalk and curb installation near the movie theater. The BNSF Railway refused to dim lights at its hub for trains hauling coal to enable easier stargazing — officials said bright light is necessary for safety.

And residents still argue about school on the day of the eclipse. Should it be canceled? On one hand, teachers envision “a teachable moment” and want to avoid having students sit in basements watching eclipse videos on websites. On the other, western Nebraska is a courteous place where kids crossing streets aren’t used to aggressive drivers from cities.

But now it is all systems go with townspeople poised and determined to make everything right for their guests.

“If you see somebody out sleeping in their car, take ’em out a cup of coffee,” Carhenge manager Howard, the other task force chairperson, told local residents last week. “Tell them: ‘Welcome to Alliance. Be as nice as you can.’”

Some people remain wary.

East of Alliance at his shop in the Sandhills, Wade Morgan, 55, stood with a burly black Rottweiler, Bruce, frowning.

“It is a little worrisome. We don’t want to see too many people out here,” he said. Cattlemen confirmed a concern that eclipse-chasing hordes will open gates and let cows wander onto roads.

Cheyenne Volz, 28, a waitress at the Mi Ranchito restaurant, said somebody might drop a cigarette on dry grass, setting off a ruinous wildfire like fires in 1893 that ravaged Alliance.

“I hate to sound doomsday about it. But it is our main priority to take care of our cattle and grass,” Volz said, anticipating a moment of mass panic everywhere when the moon blots out the sun.

“Humans are fight or flight. I’m not sure how I’m going to react. I’ve been through natural disasters,” she said. “I am excited about it, to actually witness it.”

She’ll watch from a ranch, standing in open grasslands away from cattle.

“If the cows freak out, I don’t want to put myself in harm’s way,” she said.

For thousands of years, this was Lakota country, and about 500 Lakota people live in Alliance. Others may drive down from Pine Ridge, the tribal capital 90 minutes to the north, Lakota spokesman Kevin Steele said. A powwow is planned. Buses will bring schoolkids.

Yet nobody’s sure what the eclipse will lead to as people from all over converge.

St. John’s Lutheran Church pastor Tim Stadem reflected on that, planning to host “conversations about the wonder of the universe.”

“People in earlier cultures spent a lot more time than we do looking at the skies,” Stadem said.

“This solar eclipse will drive people to look up more. It will probably trigger some things. I anticipate some new questions,” he said. “I feel like we, here, have adopted something. But we don’t know what we’ve taken on. We have no clue what we’re in for.”

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Tens of thousands of people plan to come to see the Aug. 21 eclipse in the area near Carhenge, a replica of prehistoric Stonehenge rendered in vintage Detroit vehicles. Carhenge is located in Alliance, Neb. *RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post*