

Conservation Corner

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Summer is quickly coming to an end. Pools are closing, schools are opening, and the 34th Annual Wiegert Prairie Fall Fest is fast approaching. Save the date – Sunday, August 27 – and join us as we celebrate our family and farming heritage at the Wiegert Prairie Farmstead. This week, however, we need to turn our attention to the sky and this week's celestial friend – the Great American Eclipse of Monday, August 21.

As long as people have lived on Earth, solar eclipses have alarmed, terrified, and fascinated us. Recorded ancient solar eclipses include a March 5, 1223 BC event in Ugarit, Mesopotamia, when the sun was “put to shame” and a 763 B.C. Assyrian event in Nineveh that lasted 5 minutes. An ancient Chinese eclipse in 1302 B.C. lasted for 6 minutes and 25 seconds as “3 flames ate the sun and big stars were seen.” Did you know the Chinese word for eclipse, *shi*, means “to eat”? Some historians date the Crucifixion of Jesus to solar eclipses in either 29 C.E. or 33 C.E. when “At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land.”

Do you have an eclipse story? The first solar eclipse I remember occurred on July 20, 1963. Our neighbors came over and, while the chickens went in the chicken house to roost, we viewed the eclipse using the paper pinhole camera technique.

Generally speaking, eclipses occur about every 18 months as the moon passes between the Earth and Sun in just the right plane and orbit. But it's been 99 years since a total solar eclipse has traveled cross-country across America. That's what makes next week's event so special – every U.S. citizen will be able to see some form of the eclipse as the moon's shadow races across the country from west to east at 1500 mph.

Simply stated, total solar eclipses occur because, while the sun is 400 times the size of the moon, the moon is 400 times closer to Earth and so appears to be the same size in the sky. When aligned just right, the moon will completely block out the sun.

Total solar eclipses also allow scientists to better study the sun. The last major total eclipse in the U.S., which occurred on May 29, 1919, is known as Einstein's Eclipse. Lasting 6 minutes and 51 seconds, scientists were able to measure the bending of light and confirm Einstein's Theory of General Relativity.

As always, keep safety in mind. Never look directly at the sun without eye protection, even during an eclipse. Use solar-viewing or eclipse glasses, not regular sunglasses, or view the eclipse indirectly as reflected in a pool of water. Take a look around you – sunlight filtering through tree leaves will create mini eclipse replicas on the ground.

In closing I'd like to encourage everyone to experience the eclipse. Peak time for Pocahontas County will be at 1:05 p.m. CDT Monday, August 21. Fall Fest and the Great American Eclipse – two events you won't want to miss!

