

The time I watched a total lunar eclipse from the top of a mountain

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One of my colleagues loves doing outdoorsy things, and he also loves space and astronomy. Many years ago, he invited a small number of us on an outing that combined both of his interests: A hike up a mountain to view the total lunar eclipse. Since an eclipse does not wait until you're ready, it's kind of important to stay on schedule or you'll end up missing the show. We started while it was still light out, and the people who were not seasoned hikers (like me) had to tough it out and keep going, because there was very little time in the schedule for taking breaks. (Because my colleague has been hiking so long that he overestimates the abilities of beginners.) We reached the summit in time, and the only other person there was the park ranger, who also had a set of really powerful binoculars he let us use. As the moon slipped into the earth's shadow, I stuck my hand into the air and waved it around. I figured this was the best chance I had to cast a shadow on the moon. The view, as you might have expected, was spectacular. This was my first viewing of a total eclipse, and I was surprised at how bright orange the moon became at totality.

The next total lunar eclipse I viewed was from December 2011. It was not a great success. I opted to view the eclipse from my kitchen table rather than from the top of the mountain, and at the moment of truth, the eclipse was not only obscured by clouds, but the moon also dipped behind a stand of trees near my house. So I couldn't see the moon because there were trees blocking the clouds which were blocking the moon, which was of interest only because the earth was blocking it.

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