



LOCAL

## Rare solar eclipse breaks through San Diego's cloudy skies, delighting throngs of watchers at Balboa Park



Meg Nichols, from North Park, and her daughter, Ida, 13, were among the hundreds who came out to Balboa Park's Fleet Science Center to observe the rare annular solar eclipse, which made an appearance Saturday morning. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Hundreds of people gathered outside the Fleet Science Center to catch the rare annular eclipse that will not make another appearance in the contiguous United States for a couple of decades

BY LORI WEISBERG

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**BALBOA PARK** — As the time arrived Saturday morning for the start of a rare annular eclipse in San Diego, hundreds of people gathered outside the Fleet Science Center vainly looking skyward, hoping that the fog would lift. It didn't.

Then suddenly, the telltale crescent of the sun, much of it shaded by the moon, came into sharp focus piercing the cloud cover, and the crowd reacted with a collective cheer. Oohs and aahs followed as the partial eclipse brightened, dimmed and then again glowed, putting on a light show that won't happen again here until 2046.

"I see it," shouted 8-year-old Ryder Case, his special NASA-approved viewing glasses protecting his eyes. "It's really cool. I'm so glad we waited. This is so cool."

Ryder and his parents, John and Cassie, were among about 1,000 people who made a trip to Balboa Park for a special eclipse viewing party hosted by the science center. Much like fans at a rock concert erupting in cheers and applause every time a favorite hit is performed, Saturday's sky gazers let loose with whoops of joy as they watched the moon progressively blot out more of the sun, leaving an increasingly narrow left-facing crescent.

The center sold more than 2,000 special paper viewing glasses, and kids learned how to make viewing devices of their own, fashioned from cereal and snack boxes that they poked with a pinhole for projecting the image of the blocked sun.

Beginning around 8 a.m., eclipse watchers gathered around the fountain between the Fleet Center and the Natural History museum, joining UC San Diego astronomers and the San Diego Astronomy Association, who had their telescopes trained toward the sun. The peak of the eclipse when the moon was closest to the center of the sun, arrived shortly before 9:30 a.m.

Elsewhere in the county, spontaneous viewing groups popped up, from a rugby game in Chula Vista, where parents and their kids donned eclipse glasses, to a Mission Valley

park where Allie Neri-Dewitt, a lab tech at Cuyamaca College, passed out hundreds of extra viewing glasses that had been ordered for community college students.

The partial annular eclipse seen on Saturday — different from the total solar eclipse that will be visible next April in parts of the United States — occurs when the moon is more distant from earth and therefore too small to completely cover the sun, explained Lisa Will, resident astronomer at the Fleet Science Center. The result, at its peak, is a ring of light around the perimeter of the sun, most of which is shaded by the moon. In San Diego, however, the eclipse was partial, with about 70 percent coverage, Will said.

“To see the ring you would need to be in the path of totality, which goes from the Northwest, skims the northern part of California and continues south down through New Mexico,” she said.

She noted that the last viewing party at the Fleet Center was in 2017 when there was a total eclipse visible in parts of the U.S., although in San Diego it appeared as a partial eclipse. Some 5,000 people showed up for that solar event, she said.

“We will not be able to see a total solar eclipse or a total annular eclipse from San Diego in our lifetime,” Will said. “If you want to see a total eclipse you’re going to have to travel.”



Annular solar eclipse makes an appearance in San Diego. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

For Ida Nichols of North Park, it was her keen interest in science that brought her and her mom, Meg Nichols, to Balboa Park.

“I really love science so much. I love the natural wonders of the world, and I love space,” said the 13-year-old, sitting next to her mom on the fountain’s edge. “So I thought it would look so cool to see such a thing because I never heard of the sun possibly being blocked and I thought it was a really rare opportunity and also such a beautiful thing. I wasn’t sure if we’d be able to see it because it was foggy.”

As the eclipse started to come into view, “I was like wow, I was just so happy I could be there,” Ida said, leaning into her mom and hugging her as a thank you gesture.

When the total eclipse arrives in April, mother and daughter may just make a trip to Indiana, which will be in the eclipse’s path and is also where Ida’s grandparents live,



said her mom.

“But I’m not sure what that would be like if it’s like a dark shadow,” Ida wondered.



Talie Izacard was among the hundreds who came out to Balboa Park to observe the solar eclipse. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Many people said they showed up at Saturday’s sky show not only out of curiosity but because of the relative rarity of the event.

“It’s not going to happen again until I’m in my 70s, this is a good spot to see it, it’s central and you can do other things afterwards,” Kevin Belcastro, 45, said as he awaited the appearance of the eclipse. “It’s rare and just something to do on a Saturday and be social.”

The annular eclipse did not disappoint, he said a couple hours after it had passed.

“It was really amazing to see, and I found it interesting to listen to others around me tell about the eclipse and their past experiences with them,” said the City Heights resident. “I loved hearing the cheers of the crowd.”

While most people planned their morning visit to the Fleet Center, Elijah Clark showed up completely by accident, having flown in from Denver for a day trip to San Diego.

“I was walking down the street on Park Boulevard, and I saw a whole bunch of people, and I asked, ‘What’s going on?’ and they said, ‘It’s the solar eclipse,’” said Clark, 27. “As a person who’s into astrology, history, science and outdoor experiences, I’m just amazed you can see something like this up close and personal for the very first time.

“I waited almost 27 years for this moment. It was like a huge accident waiting to happen, and it was worth it.”



Lori Weisberg