

Confessions of an Eclipse Chaser

Kate Russo (*Queen's University, Belfast*)

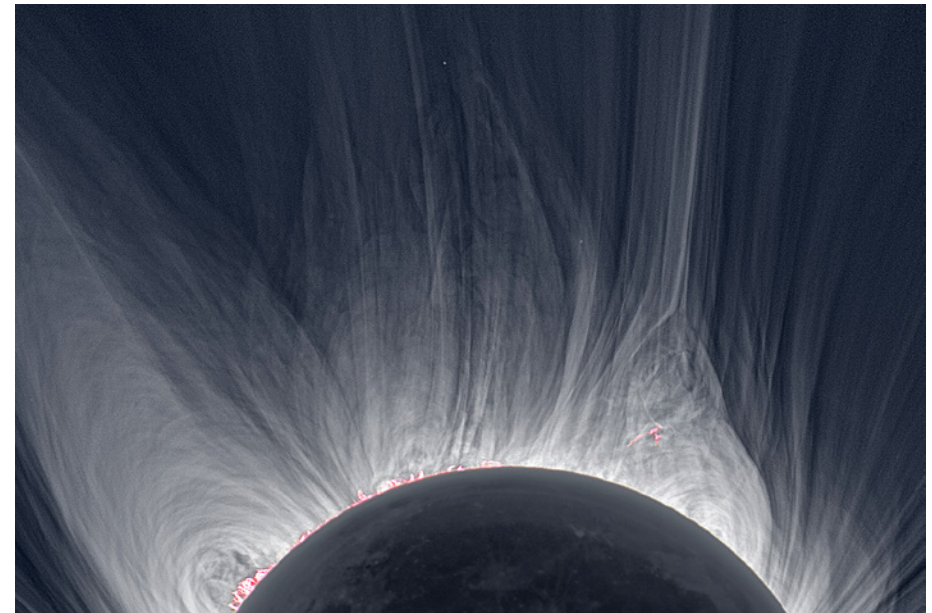


Editor's Note

As the astronomy community in the United States prepares itself for the Great American Eclipse of 2017, we thought it timely to repeat this wonderful Astronomy Beat article by self-proclaimed eclipse addict, Kate Russo. In this edited excerpt from her book *Total Addiction*, Kate describes her reactions to her first solar eclipse and how the event changed her life.

My name is Kate. And I am an eclipse chaser. My eclipse interest was, I believe, shaped during my childhood by my father's curiosity about the night sky and by witnessing a partial eclipse when I was about seven years old. I also recall reading Enid Blyton's book *The Secret Mountain* when I was 11, which featured a total solar eclipse in the storyline. I had always been drawn to the image of a total eclipse and thought it was worth seeing one day. But it was not until my late 20s that I stood under the shadow of the Moon for the very first time. Since that eclipse on the coast of France in 1999, I have been an eclipse chaser.

Whenever I tell people I am an eclipse chaser there is usually a response of surprise, mixed with curiosity and bemusement. Surprise, because most people are aware of eclipses but may never have thought of anyone 'chasing eclipses.' Curiosity, because I do not



This high-resolution image shows details above the eastern limb of the Sun during the 2008 solar eclipse. The swirls in the corona (the Sun's upper atmosphere) and bright, red prominences (jets of hot gas) are easily visible. © 2008 Miloslav Druckmüller, Martin Dietzel, Peter Aniol, Vojtech Rušin (www.zam.fme.vutbr.cz/~druck/eclipse/Index.htm).

fit the typical profile of what they would expect an eclipse chaser to be — a new age reveller, or a bearded man fiddling with a telescope. Bemusement, because people do not understand why I would want to travel around the world to see something that lasts only for a few

minutes. Occasionally I get a look that suggests the person thinks I have lost my marbles. However, revealing myself as an eclipse chaser is a social lubricant that always gets interesting conversation going. Telling people that I am a Clinical Psychologist, in contrast, is a definite conversation stopper in many social situations.

My First Total Eclipse

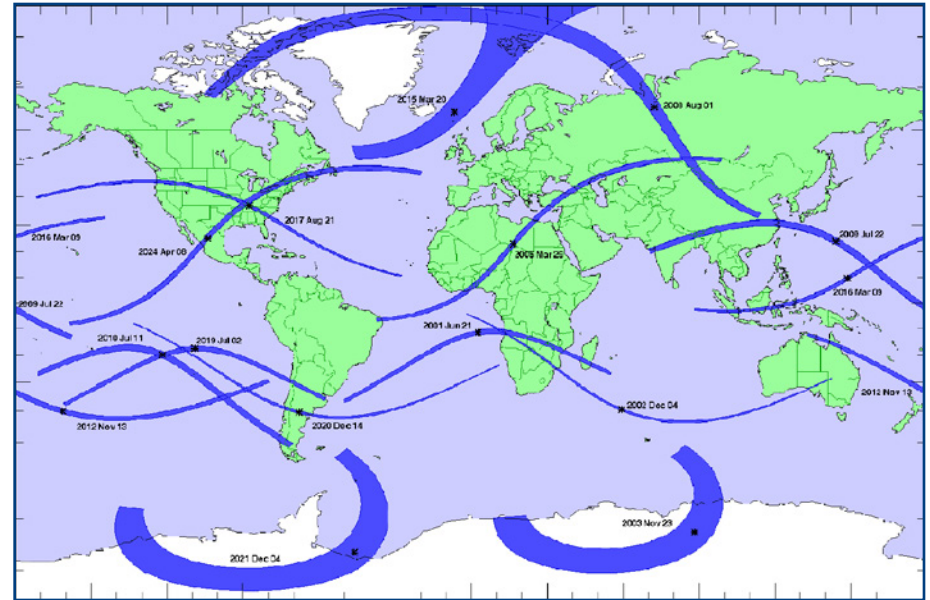
My first total eclipse was a very powerful experience. In 1999 [my partner] Geordie and I had to leave the UK for visa purposes, and this coincided with the total eclipse over Europe. So we were able to make simple arrangements that allowed us to see the total eclipse from Fecamp, along the northern coast of France:

I had no expectations. I didn't know anything scientific about eclipses. We got there to find a massive crowd of people. We found a spot down at the beachfront. We really just followed the crowds. I was so excited when I saw the first bite of the Sun. Then I remember feeling a little bored watching the partial phases. We had a bottle of red wine and some little pastries, so we were sitting down behind a wall protected from the wind, drinking and eating, and would stand up every once in a while and have a look through our eclipse glasses as the partial eclipse progressed.

But then there was a point where things changed rapidly. The wind picked up, then eeriness. Do you know that feeling when the crowd suddenly changes? There was a shift — something very tangible that we noticed. We figured that we needed to stand up and take notice. It was happening. It was just... that ominous feeling. I felt it in my chest. I remember feeling that something big was going to happen. I didn't know what to expect — it was just unfolding. It was ominous. And it was very hard to pinpoint what that was.

The sensations were incredibly physical, and that really took me by surprise:

It was such a physical feeling in my chest and that's a very hard thing



Total solar eclipse paths between 2001 and 2025. Eclipses happen roughly once every 18 months, and their scattered (though not random) locations means you have to travel if you want to see one. Courtesy Fred Espenak, NASA/GSFC.

to explain. A shuddering, a shaking. It didn't feel like pure adrenaline. I don't think I was overtly scared. But it was a thrill — it was very exciting. It's a body sensation — connection. I didn't know what I was supposed to look for during the eclipse, but it didn't matter. I just remember thinking: "It's all around, it's happening. The peak is about to come." You could feel it.

Totally Strikes

Here, again I am struck by the physical sensations that I describe. I recognise that I didn't know what to expect. For me it was the sounds that really made the connection between what was happening and what I was feeling. What is also striking is the ease with which I am able to re-experience these emotions — this event happened 13 years ago and although I do not recall much of the visual

detail of the eclipse itself, I am re-living my reactions to the experience as if it were happening. As I recounted these physical reactions during an interview, I started to shake. My face became flushed, and I was finding it difficult to connect with language — I was finding it hard to communicate. I am referring repeatedly to a ‘connection.’ Although hard to verbalise during the interview, the connection was perhaps one of connecting on a purer level with my body and emotions. It was about being there in that moment and experiencing nature coming alive and rushing towards me as totality occurred:

Then “Oh my God, it’s here!!” It was just thrilling. I remember hearing the crowd. It was almost like the crowd’s response became one, and this united crowd response lifted up. I was just so blown away. I have no recollection of what I was saying or thinking. I just remember being so captivated, even though I can’t even remember what I saw. In fact that sounds very strange, but I can’t remember the detail of what I saw in the sky. All I remember is that overwhelming sense of sheer thrill. Euphoria. Just intensity. And that feeling of connection.

We didn’t have binoculars — we didn’t have anything apart from eclipse glasses. It didn’t matter. It was just about the connection. I wouldn’t say it was a connection with cosmic energy or anything like that. I didn’t have any religious feeling. It was just a connection with the environment. I felt insignificant, but extremely lucky and very strong. I felt connected with the crowd until the moment of totality and then I was so focused on what was happening within me that everything else melted away except me and the Universe. I think that is why I don’t remember details of the actual eclipse because I was taking it all in on a very physical level.

The peak of that eclipse lasted for two minutes and seven seconds, but to me it seemed a lifetime. I recall being completely stunned at what had just happened once totality was over:

It was so exhilarating. After it finished, I was like “Wow, what was that?” I wasn’t disappointed it was over. It was utter thrill that I had

that opportunity to be there — to experience it. That’s when I became emotionally overwhelmed — the choked up feeling. The intensity swept through me. I was thinking “Oh my God, what was that?”

Immediately afterwards I knew I wanted to repeat that experience. I felt so strongly that I had to experience this again and as soon as I could. It had such a profound effect on me. It was as if I was seeing things in a different way and my view of my life and the world had just expanded. I knew it had changed my life, and that the eclipse experience was now going to be a part of my life. It was not going to be a once-in-a-lifetime thing for me. It was at that moment that I became an eclipse chaser. I didn’t want to miss a moment.

That first experience was obviously a very powerful and physical experience for me. Subsequent eclipses have been similar, although not as intensely profound as that first time. I can never have that complete naivety again, of not being aware of what is going to happen, although each eclipse is unique and the experience always seems new. Once I saw my first, I wanted to learn more about eclipses, and I have found that the more I know, the more I feel I want to control things such as the weather and location. Anxiety creeps in because I understand that the eclipse will occur but there are no guarantees that I will see it. I have been very lucky — my first six total eclipses were clear. It wasn’t until 2009 that I was faced with cloud cover denying me the totality experience — that was hugely disappointing.

I have a photograph of myself after the total eclipse in Turkey in 2006, which is one of my favourite pictures (right). I look at that photograph now and I can still capture that feeling — I just look alive.



Credit: © Geordie McRobert

About the Author

Kate Russo is a Clinical Psychologist who works in the UK and specializes in Paediatric Psychology. She has a passion for phenomenological research (she researches people's experiences — what it is like for them from their own subjective experience). Kate has just published her first book, *Total Addiction: The Life of an Eclipse Chaser* and is working on her second book about the psychology of the eclipse experience. Kate has experienced 10 eclipses, her most recent being totality in Australia on November 14, 2012.



Resources

- Kate's website is www.beinginthesadow.com.
- A site that has plenty of good information about eclipses and eclipse chasers is *Eclipse Chasers* by Bill Kramer: www.eclipse-chasers.com.
- The NASA Eclipse website reveals where and when to see upcoming solar eclipses: <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/eclipse.html>.
- To see incredible photographs of eclipses past, visit Miloslav Druckmüller's website: www.zam.fme.vutbr.cz/~druck/eclipse.
- Great American Eclipse website: <http://www.greatamericaneclipse.com>
- Meteorologist Jay Anderson's eclipse weather site: <http://eclipsophile.com>
- Fred "Mr. Eclipse" Espenak's website: EclipseWise.com ✨

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