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Total Solar Eclipse Bulletin

- excerpt -

OBSERVING THE ECLIPSE

Eye Safety and Solar Eclipses by Dr. Ralph Chou

A total solar eclipse is probably the most spectacular astronomical event that most people will experience in their lives. There is a great deal of interest in watching eclipses, and thousands of astronomers (both, amateur and Professional) and other eclipse enthusiasts travel around the world to observe and photograph them.

A solar eclipse offers students a unique opportunity to see a natural phenomenon that illustrates the basic principles of mathematics and science that are taught through elementary and secondary school. Indeed, many scientists (including astronomers!) have been inspired to study science as a result of seeing a total solar eclipse. Teachers can use eclipses to show how the laws of motion and the mathematics of orbits can predict the occurrence of eclipses. The use of pinhole cameras and telescopes or binoculars to observe an eclipse leads to an understanding of the optics of these devices. The rise and fall of environmental light levels during an eclipse illustrate the principles of radiometry and photometry, while biology classes can observe the associated behavior of plants and animals. It is also an opportunity for children of school age to contribute actively to scientific research—observations of contact timings at different locations along the eclipse path are useful in refining our knowledge of the orbital motions of the Moon and Earth, and sketches and photographs of the solar corona can be used to build a three-dimensional picture of the Sun's extended atmosphere during the eclipse.

Observing the Sun, however, can be dangerous if the proper precautions are not taken. The solar radiation that reaches the surface of the Earth ranges from ultraviolet (UV) radiation at wavelengths longer than 290nm, to radio waves in

the meter range. The tissues in the eye transmit a substantial part of the radiation between 380 – 400nm to the light-sensitive retina at the back of the eye. While environmental exposure to UV radiation is known to contribute to the accelerated aging of the outer layers of the eye and the development of cataracts, the primary concern over improper viewing of the Sun during an eclipse is for the development of "eclipse blindness" or retinal burns.

Exposure of the retina to intense visible light causes damage to its light-sensitive rod and cone cells. The light triggers a series of complex chemical reactions within the cells which damages their ability to respond to a Visual Stimulus, and in extreme cases, can destroy them. The result is a loss of visual function, which may be either temporary or permanent depending on the severity of the damage. When a person looks repeatedly, or for a long time, at the Sun without proper eye protection, this photochemical retinal damage may be accompanied by a thermal injury – the high level of visible and near-infrared radiation causes heating that literally cooks the exposed tissue. This thermal injury or photocoagulation destroys the rods and cones, creating a small blind area. The danger to vision is significant because photic retinal injuries occur without any feeling of pain (the retina has no pain receptors), and the visual effects do not become apparent for at least several hours after the damage is done (Pitts 1993). Viewing the Sun through binoculars, a telescope, or other optical devices without proper protective filters can result in thermal retinal injury because of the high irradiance level in the magnified image.

The only time that the Sun can be viewed safely with the naked eye is during a total eclipse, when the Moon completely covers the disk of the Sun. ***It is never safe to look at a partial or annular eclipse, or the partial phases of a total solar eclipse, without the proper equipment***

and techniques. Even when 99% of the Sun's surface (the photosphere) is obscured during the partial phases of a solar eclipse, the remaining crescent Sun is still intense enough to cause a retinal burn, even though illumination levels are comparable to twilight (Chou 1981 and 1996, and Marsh 1982). Failure to use proper observing methods may result in permanent eye damage and severe visual loss. This can have important adverse effects on career choices and earning potential, because it has been shown that most individuals who sustain eclipse-related eye injuries are children and young adults (Penner and McNair 1966, Chou and Krailo 1981, and Michaelides et al. 2001).

The same techniques for observing the Sun outside of eclipses are used to view and photograph annular solar eclipses and the partly eclipsed Sun (Sherrod 1981, Pasachoff 2000, Pasachoff and Covington 1993, and Reynolds and Sweetsir 1995). The safest and most inexpensive method is by projection. A pinhole or small opening is used to form an image of the Sun on a screen placed about a meter behind the opening. Multiple openings in perfbboard, a loosely woven straw hat, or even between interlaced fingers can be used to cast a pattern of solar images on a screen. A similar effect is seen on the ground below a broad-leafed tree: the many "pinholes" formed by overlapping leaves creates hundreds of crescent-shaped images. Binoculars or a small telescope mounted on a tripod can also be used to project a magnified image of the Sun onto a white card. All of these methods can be used to provide a safe view of the partial phases of an eclipse to a group of observers, but care must be taken to ensure that no one looks through the device. The main advantage of the projection methods is that nobody is looking directly at the Sun. The disadvantage of the pinhole method is that the screen must be placed at least a meter behind the opening to get a solar image that is large enough to see easily.

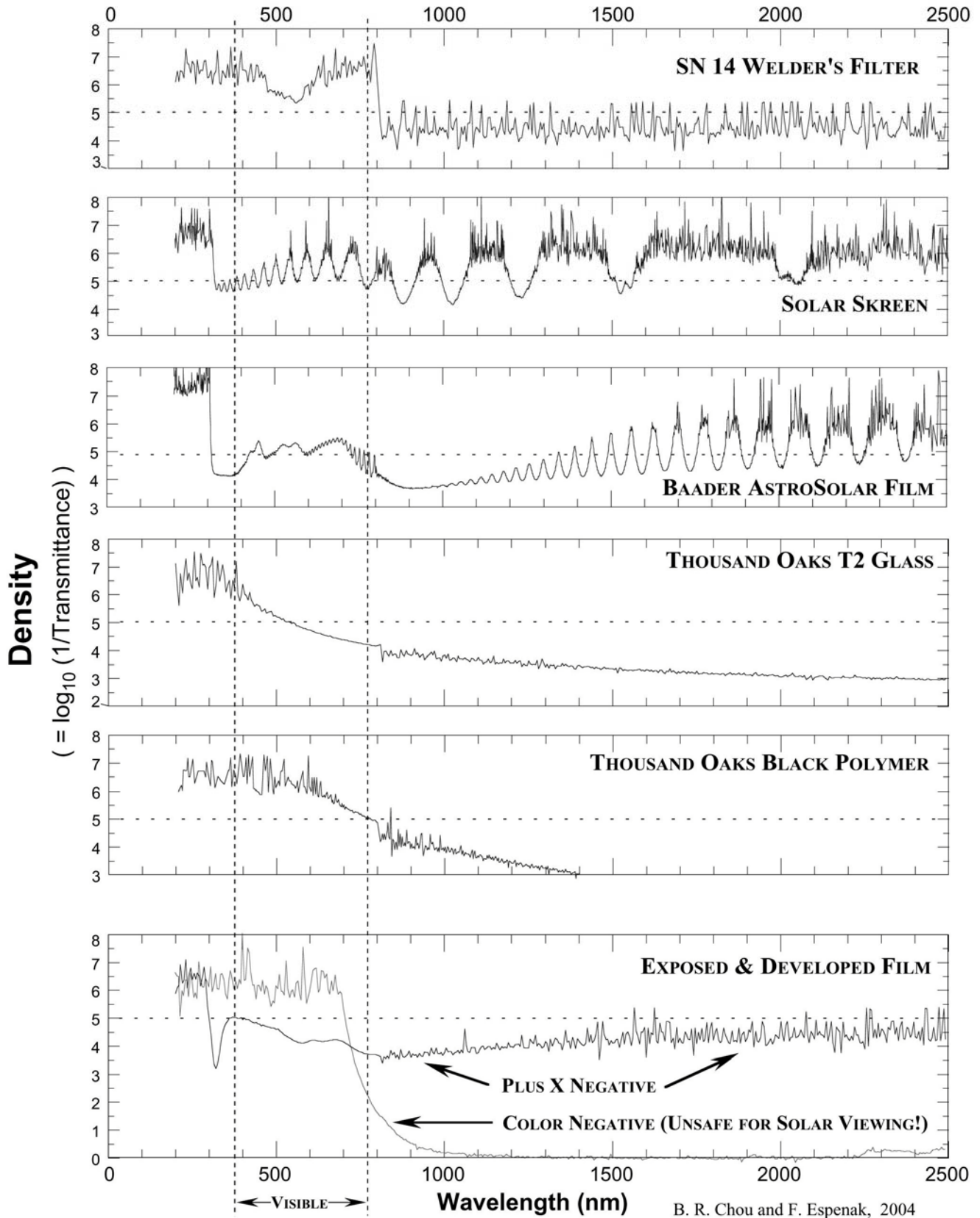
The Sun can only be viewed directly when filters specially designed to protect the eyes are used. Most of these filters have a thin layer of chromium alloy or aluminum deposited on their surfaces that attenuates both visible and near-infrared radiation. A safe solar filter should transmit less than 0.003% (density ~ 4.5) of visible light and no more than 0.5% (density ~ 2.3) of the near-infrared radiation from 780 – 1400nm. (In addition to the term transmittance [in percent], the energy transmission of a filter can also be described by the term density [unitless] where density, d , is the common logarithm of the reciprocal of transmittance, t , or $d = \log_{10}[1/t]$. A density of '0' corresponds to a transmittance of 100%; a density of '1' corresponds to a transmittance of 10%; a density of '2' corresponds

to a transmittance of 1%, etc.). Figure 23 shows transmittance curves for a selection of safe solar filters.

One of the most widely available filters for safe solar viewing is shade number 14 welder's glass, which can be obtained from welding supply outlets. A popular inexpensive alternative is aluminized polyester that has been made specially for solar observation. (Note that this material is commonly known as "mylar," although the registered trademark "Mylar®" belongs to Dupont who does not manufacture this material for use as a solar filter. Note that "Space blankets" and aluminized polyester film used in gardening are NOT suitable for this purpose!) Unlike the welding glass, aluminized polyester can be cut to fit any viewing device, and does not break when dropped. It has recently been pointed out that some aluminized polyester filters may have large (up to approximately 1mm in size) defects in their aluminum coatings that may be hazardous. A microscopic analysis of examples of such defects shows that despite their appearance, the defects arise from a hole in one of the two aluminized polyester films used in the filter. There is no large opening completely devoid of the protective aluminum coating. While this is a quality control problem, the presence of a defect in the aluminum coating does not necessarily imply that the filter is hazardous. When in doubt, an aluminized polyester solar filter that has coating defects larger than 0.2mm in size, or more than a single defect in any 5mm circular zone of the filter, should not be used.

An alternative to aluminized polyester that has become quite popular is "black polymer" in which carbon particles are suspended in a resin matrix. This material is somewhat stiffer than polyester film and requires a special holding cell if it is to be used at the front of binoculars, telephoto lenses, or telescopes. Intended mainly as a visual filter, the polymer gives a yellow image of the Sun (aluminized polyester produces a blue-white image). This type of filter may show significant variations in density of the tint across its extent; some areas may appear much lighter than others. Lighter areas of the filter transmit more infrared radiation than may be desirable. The advent of high resolution digital imaging in astronomy, especially for photographing the Sun, has increased the demand for solar filters of higher optical quality. Baader AstroSolar Safety Film, a metal-coated resin, can be used for both, visual and photographic solar observations. A much thinner material, it has excellent optical quality and much less scattered light than polyester filters. Filters using optically flat glass substrates are available from several manufacturers, but are quite expensive in large sizes.

SPECTRAL RESPONSE OF SOME COMMONLY AVAILABLE SOLAR FILTERS



B. R. Chou and F. Espenak, 2004

Many experienced solar observers use one or two layers of black-and-white film that has been fully exposed to light and developed to maximum density. The metallic silver contained in the film emulsion is the protective filter; however, any black-and-white negative with images in it is not suitable for this purpose. More recently, solar observers have used floppy disks and compact disks (CDs and CD-ROMs) as protective filters by covering the central openings and looking through the disk media. However, the optical quality of the solar image formed by a floppy disk or CD is relatively poor compared to aluminized polyester or welder's glass. Some CDs are made with very thin aluminum coatings which are not safe – if the CD can be seen through in normal room lighting, it should not be used! No filter should be used with an optical device (e.g., binoculars, telescope, camera) unless it has been specifically designed for that purpose and is mounted at the front end. Some sources of solar filters are listed below.

Unsafe filters include color film, black-and-white film that contains no silver (i.e., chromogenic film), film negatives with images on them, smoked glass, sunglasses (single or multiple pairs), photographic neutral density filters and polarizing filters. Most of these transmit high levels of invisible infrared radiation, which can cause a thermal retinal burn (see Figure page 3). The fact that the Sun appears dim, or that no discomfort is felt when looking at the Sun through the filter, is no guarantee that the eyes are safe.

Solar filters designed to thread into eyepieces that are often provided with inexpensive telescopes are also unsafe. These glass filters often crack unexpectedly from overheating when the telescope is pointed at the Sun, and retinal damage can occur faster than the observer can move the eye from the eyepiece. Avoid unnecessary risks. Local planetariums, science centers, or amateur astronomy clubs can provide additional information on how to observe the eclipse safely.

There are some concerns that UVA radiation (wavelengths from 315 – 380nm) in sunlight may also adversely affect the retina (Del Priore 1999). While there is some experimental evidence for this, it only applies to the special case of aphakia, where the natural lens of the eye has been removed because of cataract or injury, and no UV-blocking spectacle, contact or intraocular lens has been fitted. In an intact normal human eye, UVA radiation does not reach the retina because it is absorbed by the crystalline lens. In aphakia, normal environmental exposure to solar UV radiation may indeed cause chronic retinal damage. The solar filter materials discussed in this article, however, attenuate solar UV radiation to a level well below the minimum permissible occupational exposure for UVA (ACGIH 2004), so

an aphakic observer is at no additional risk of retinal damage when looking at the Sun through a proper solar filter.

In the days and weeks before a solar eclipse occurs, there are often news stories and announcements in the media, warning about the dangers of looking at the eclipse. Unfortunately, despite the good intentions behind these messages, they frequently contain misinformation, and may be designed to scare people from viewing the eclipse at all. This tactic may backfire, however, particularly when the messages are intended for students. A student who heeds warnings from teachers and other authorities not to view the eclipse because of the danger to vision, and later learns that other students did see it safely, may feel cheated out of the experience. Having now learned that the authority figure was wrong on one occasion, how is this student going to react when other health-related advice about drugs, AIDS, or smoking is given (Pasachoff 2001)? Misinformation may be just as bad, if not worse, than no information.

Remember that the total phase of an eclipse can, and should, be seen without any filters, and certainly never by projection! It is completely safe to do so. Even after observing 14 solar eclipses, the author finds the naked-eye view of *the totally eclipsed* Sun awe-inspiring. The experience should be enjoyed by all.

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