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Triple moon events to rise over U.S. on Wednesday morning

By Jacob Dick Messenger-Inquirer Jan 30, 2018 Updated 5 hrs ago

Early Wednesday morning, three lunar events will be visible together over the United States for the first time in 150 years.

The sun's light will be blocked from reflecting off the moon by Earth's shadow during a time when the full moon will appear about 16 percent bigger than usual. It's also the second full moon in one month — an occasion referred to as a “blue moon.”

If that description didn't sound particularly exciting, some astronomers and experts of celestial events say there is a good reason for that.

The event has been hyped for several days as the “super blue blood moon,” but Rico Tyler, SKyTeach master teacher at Western Kentucky University, said some of those terms can be misleading as to the importance of the coming eclipse.

“This is the kind of event that isn't a researcher's event,” Tyler said. “You want to watch this because it's a beautiful thing to see. Lunar eclipses are amazing sights.”

Tyler said he will be getting up early Wednesday morning to see the eclipse, but not because the moon will be washed in a special red hue or appear especially large.

He said every lunar eclipse is a “blood moon,” but the moon can appear anywhere between a pale yellow to a dark brown. This is because the dim light bouncing off the moon during the eclipse is bent by the atmosphere in the same way that creates vibrant sunsets.

Tyler said debunking all of the labels that have been attached to lunar events shouldn't detract from the beauty of watching the moon slowly darken before your eyes.

“I think we could get a good show and might be lucky enough to see a very pretty lunar eclipse,” Tyler said.

People in western Kentucky won't be able to see the entire eclipse, but at approximately 5:45 a.m., viewers should have a clear vision of the moon being slowly covered. About 7:10 a.m., western Kentucky will be one of the last places east of Missouri to glimpse an almost fully eclipsed moon before the sun rises.

NASA will broadcast a livestream of the event starting at 5:30 a.m. Wednesday.

The last lunar trifecta event happened 35 years ago, and the next one won't occur until 2037.

Descriptions such as “blue,” “blood” and “super” might not have people clamoring to set their alarm clocks and dash into the cold morning, but Richard Gelderman, professor and director of WKU's Hardin Planetarium said that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

He said using the terms that have recently cropped up mostly on social media leaves a false impression of how important or dramatic an event will be. It singles out visible coincidences like having two full moons in a month while filtering out nonvisible events like a lack of a full moon in February.

Gelderman said being honest when describing events means people who don't study astronomy won't have high expectations for routine events and become numb when the truly extraordinary ones come around.

“I don’t hate the fact the event is happening, but I wince when I see those hyperbolic words together,” Gelderman said. “It’s always fun to have the opportunity for a teachable moment, but I will not be waking up to see it Wednesday morning.”

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