Look up! Brief total lunar eclipse to grace the sky Saturday

April 3 2015, byAlicia Chang

This Oct. 8, 2014, file photo, shows the Blood Moon, created by the full moon passing into the shadow of the earth during a total lunar eclipse, as seen from Monterey Park, Calif. Skygazers in the western U.S. and Canada will be treated to a total eclipse of the moon before dawn, Saturday, April 4, 2015. Scientists said it'll be an unusually brief eclipse, with totality lasting several minutes. (AP Photo/ Nick Ut, File)

Don't blink. There's a total eclipse of the moon Saturday—and it's an unusually short one.

If there are clear skies, the 3½-hour spectacle is visible from start to finish from the western U.S. and Canada where it occurs before dawn. Skygazers in the Midwest and East Coast only get part of the lunar show.

The eclipse can also be seen in its entirety Saturday night from eastern Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Europe and Africa are shut out.

Things to know about the celestial attraction:

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HOW LONG IS THE TOTAL ECLIPSE?

NASA calculates the total eclipse—the moment when Earth's shadow completely blocks the moon—at only five minutes. Using a different model, the U.S. Naval Observatory put it at about 12 minutes. In either case, it's the shortest lunar eclipse of the century.

On the west coast of North America, the total eclipse—what astronomers call totality—begins shortly before 5 a.m. PDT.

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WHY SO BRIEF?

In this case, the moon skims the upper part of Earth's shadow. If the moon passes through the middle of the shadow, the eclipse lasts longer.

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WHY A "BLOOD MOON" DURING THE ECLIPSE?

"Blood moon" refers to its orange or red appearance—the result of sunlight scattering off Earth's atmosphere. Whether the moon appears dark red, copper, bronze or another shade depends on several factors including the amount of volcanic ash in the atmosphere.

"That's what makes lunar eclipses so interesting," said Geoff Chester of the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington.

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WHEN IS THE NEXT TOTAL LUNAR ECLIPSE?

The next full eclipse of the moon occurs on Sept. 28 and will be visible across the U.S. and Canada, as well as western Europe and Africa. Totality will last a little over an hour.

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IS SPECIAL EQUIPMENT NEEDED TO WATCH?

Unlike solar eclipses which require eye protection, you only need clear skies to view a lunar eclipse. A pair of binoculars or backyard telescope will enhance your view, but they're not necessary.

"Get a comfortable chair ... and just look up," said Mitzi Adams, an astronomer at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama.

More information: NASA's eclipse map: go.usa.gov/3gwxP

Watch: new.livestream.com/GriffithObservatoryTV

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