

THE GREATEST AIRPORT PARTY EVER

DOWN-HOME AVIATION AT ITS BEST IN THE
AMERICAN HEARTLAND

By Martha King

This normally nontowered airport was probably the busiest it had ever been. The airport needed to land an airplane about every minute and a half to accommodate the arrivals in the time available between sunrise and 10:30 a.m., when everyone wanted to be on the ground. The trick was getting everyone off the runway and into parking to clear the way for those behind.

The big show was supposed to be at 11:50 a.m., but John and I had a great time watching all the airplanes long before then. Every kind of airplane you could imagine was joining the party, from homebuilts to jets. And a great party it would be.

Nature would be providing us a rare show — a total solar eclipse. Over any given spot on Earth, a total solar eclipse occurs about once every 375 years. If John and I are ever to see another one, there will likely be an airplane involved — like there was this time.

We had read estimates that as many as 7.4 million people would compete with one another on the roads to get to the path of totality. We understood there would be traffic jams everywhere. No problem, we said. That's where general aviation shines — we will fly.

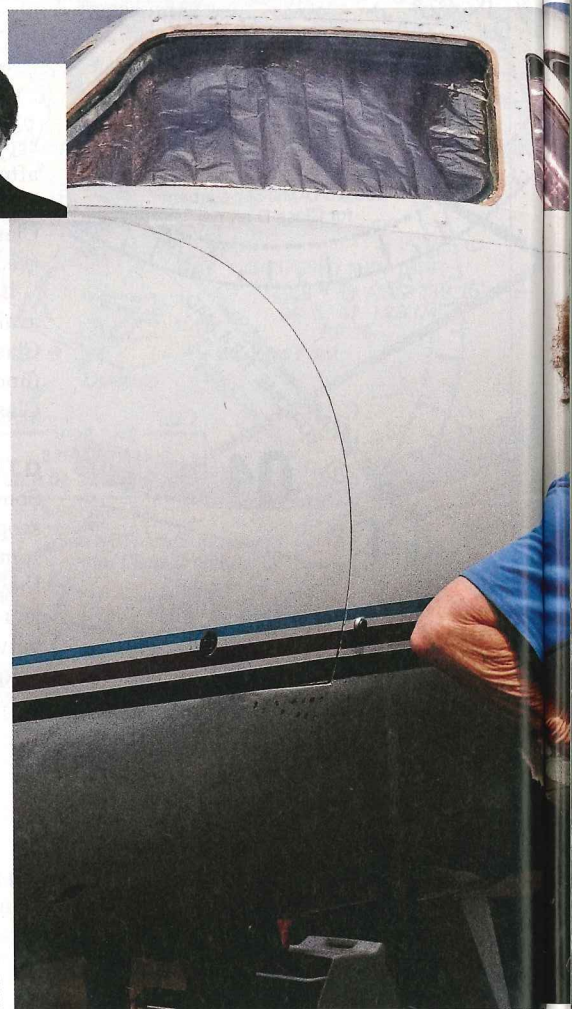
Our plan was to wait and see what

the weather looked like the day before the eclipse, then fly to wherever looked most likely to guarantee clear skies. And if the weather turned unexpectedly cloudy on eclipse day, we could fly somewhere else.

This sounded great in theory, but when we started investigating good locations for eclipse viewing we discovered that some airports had been taking aircraft parking reservations for the eclipse for years — and all expected to have to turn away airplanes. It became obvious that we needed to pick a destination airport and settle in.

The hard part was what airport to choose. A generally good weather forecast for this time of year would be key. Plus, we wouldn't want to be caught in traffic jams on the ground on the big day. So, we would need to pick an airport away from any major metropolitan areas. There were a lot of places in the great American West that would fit the bill.

We chose Alliance, Nebraska (AIA) — and we hit the jackpot. The sole FBO, Heartland Aviation, is a wonderful mom-and-pop operation. (As you can imagine, John and I are impressed by mom-and-pop operations.) Gaylene and Jeff Jensen have owned and operated Heartland Aviation for over 27 years, but their connection goes even further back;

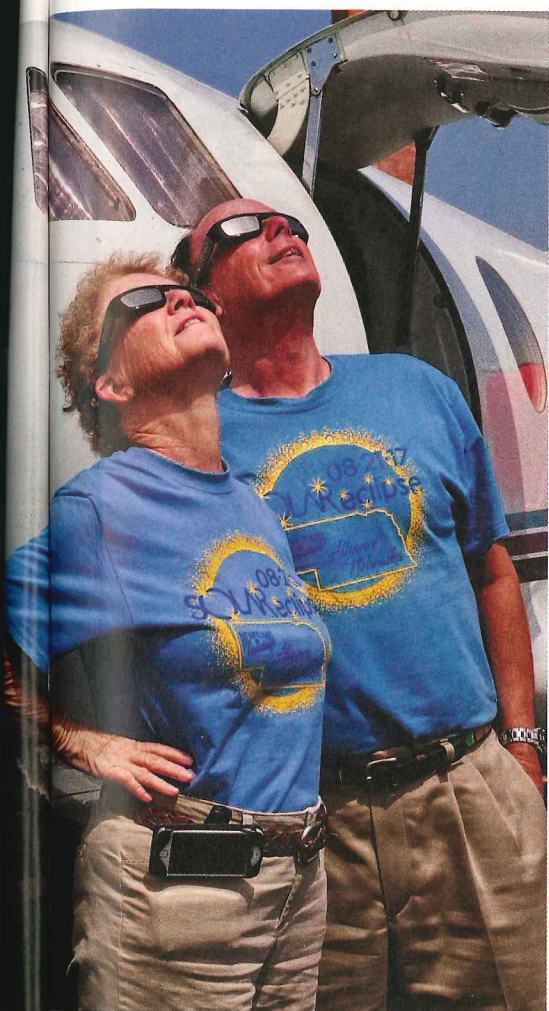


Jeff had been working there since he was in high school. Their enthusiasm for aviation, and people who fly, brims over in every conversation.

When we made our aircraft parking reservation with Heartland some months before the solar eclipse, Gaylene told us they already had more than 200 single-engine piston aircraft and 25 twins and jets scheduled to fly in that morning. Like every other airport in the path of the eclipse, they fully expected to have to turn away airplanes.

Their biggest problem, though, was not going to be room to park airplanes. It would be getting the arriving aircraft parked in the time available on the morning of the eclipse. Denver Center had told Jeff and Gaylene that careful planning would be required to get airplanes clear of the runways and to parking fast

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN AND MARTHA KING



☒ Lots of planning went into flying and staying at an airport that was in the eclipse's path of totality.

enough to keep the traffic flow up. That's when they realized the need to land an airplane about every minute and a half. And that didn't allow for any instrument approaches, or wake-turbulence separation.

When we heard that, we realized we wanted to get there ahead of the crowd. We didn't want to join the conga line of airplanes into that airport on the same day as the event. Now we had a real problem. If we were going to come early, we needed a place to stay. As we got into it, we realized that with our original plan to fly in and out on the same day we had wasted precious time while everyone else was arranging accommodations.

This is where an FBO in a small community is so valuable. Gaylene had a friend who knew a woman who

had just put her house up for rent that weekend. I jumped at the deal, and arranged for us to arrive on Saturday at noon instead of Monday morning.

One of the things that John and I have savored the most about general aviation is the way that small airports introduce you to communities you would never have known otherwise. In Alliance, everyone we met welcomed us with great warmth, and with curiosity about where we were from and how we flew our own plane to get there.

Our early arrival gave us the opportunity to settle in and revel in the grand party the city was throwing for its visitors. We enjoyed lots of free musical entertainment, snacked from food trucks, attended a Native American powwow and thoroughly enjoyed a portable planetarium show designed to explain the eclipse to grade-schoolers.

On the day of the event, we headed out to the airport early to watch something very special — FAA controllers, operating from a temporary control tower perched atop a city dump truck, skillfully keeping airplanes separated. The controllers had arrived on very short notice when the expected number of airplanes escalated. It is a life-saving service that the U.S. air traffic control system provides to general aviation when it sees the need.

Meanwhile, beginning at 5 a.m., Jeff and Gaylene's crew of 30-plus volunteers guided aircraft to parking, fueled them and moved pilots and their passengers to the ramp in trams. Plus, Jeff and Gaylene threw a party worthy of the event, complete with custom-designed eclipse T-shirts and eclipse glasses. For breakfast, they served biscuits and gravy or breakfast

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burritos, and for lunch, burgers, hot dogs or chicken breasts — all at unbelievably reasonable prices.

The airport was open only to people who had arrived in an airplane, and as the day progressed, the mood reflected the camaraderie of 400 or so fellow aviators talking with one another about where they came from and how they had fallen in love with flying. We realized we were sharing an event that each of us would remember for the rest of our lives.

The eclipse, of course, did not disappoint. We were powerfully moved by the phenomena that have mesmerized humankind since the beginning of time — a darkening sky and sudden chill accompanied by sunset colors circling the horizon, a corona ring around the sun and stars appearing during the day.

But what was truly special to those of us who flew in to Alliance was general aviation at its very best. It was a wonderful day, brought to us by a couple who had worked for months to make it happen. Gaylene and Jeff created an opportunity for hundreds of aviation enthusiasts to share a very special event in what for all of us was the most fun way imaginable. **✪**