



Stars, hide your fires

CITIZEN PHOTO BY BRENT BRAATEN/CP PHOTO

Blair Stunder prepared his telescope in Connaught Hill Park Tuesday for the transit of Venus, left. The celestial event, seen above courtesy of NASA's Solar Dynamic Observatory, featured the planet Venus, the black dot, passing in front of the sun. The transit will next occur in 105 years. **For more on this story, page 3.**

P.G. skies show no love for Venus

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Grey skies and the occasional smattering of rain couldn't convince a small group of stargazers to forfeit their perch Tuesday afternoon at the top of Connaught Hill.

Members of the local astronomy club were optimistic that Mother Nature would give them a few moments of grace to glimpse a once-in-a-lifetime event.

For a six-hour span, the rare spectacle of Venus passing in front of the sun was available, with first contact – the edge of Venus touching the edge of the sun – occurring just after 3 p.m.

Maurice Sluka said all the astronomers would need is a short break in the clouds. "We'll be able to line up the telescopes quickly to get a few views," said the 12-year member of the Prince George Astronomical Society, shortly after the time for first contact had passed.

The club had dedicated telescopes on the hill for viewing, including one designed specifically to look at the sun, with a filter that blocked 99.9 per cent of the light.

Venus would have been visible without any aids, but looking at the sun with unprotected eyes can cause retina damage.

Sluka said he would be a lit-

tle disappointed if the wait was in vain, but that Prince George enthusiasts weren't alone in that disappointment.

"Most of western Canada is in the same boat. It would be a day's worth of driving to find skies clear enough," he said.

"If it was clear – to put it in perspective – if the sun was a watermelon, Venus would look like a pea," explained Blair Stunder, PGAS president.

Venus transits are actually twice-in-a-lifetime events, as they occur twice within a space of a few years and then take another 105 years until seen again.

But the weather was also uncooperative for Prince George viewers for the last transit in June 2004.

"Anybody living today won't see the next one," Stunder said. "In terms of astronomy events, this is pretty rare."

That rarity comes from the different angles of orbit between Venus and Earth. "There's only two spots where the planes intersect each other," Stunder said.

According to Stunder, dealing with the vastness of an astronomy timeframe helps put things in perspective.

"You better do it now, because it doesn't wait. Life goes on," he said.

Other events, such as a Mercury transit, and lunar or solar eclipses happen on a more regular basis.