

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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BACKING VS. VEERING

Along the Maine coast the seamen say that if a storm clears off through the north it will not stay fair so long as if it clears through the south. You know that when a storm passes the wind usually changes from some easterly to a westerly direction. There are two ways to change from east to west. If the storm center goes by on the south, the wind "backs" or shifts typically from east or northeast to north to northwest. With a storm center passing by to the north, however, the wind "veers" or changes, for example, from southeast to south to southwest to west.

Is the seamen's saying correct? Maybe, but Mr. E. P. Jones of the Portland office of the Weather Bureau tabulated the storms for one winter to test the truth of the traditional belief. He found that backing winds were somewhat more frequent than veering winds, and, contrary to the general impression, were followed by just as long a period of fair weather as veering winds. Indeed, after clearing up through the north, that is with backing winds, the weather stayed fair an average of 2.9 days, while for veering winds the figure was 2.5 days. Undoubtedly, the seamen will not accept this official "proof" that they are wrong, but will continue to use the weather proverb as before.

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