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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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HOW THUNDERSTORMS TRAVEL

When we hear thunder, or when we see distant lightning or thunder-heads we almost involuntarily consider whether or not the storm is likely to affect our locality. Naturally we expect that it will, and if it does not we say the storm has "gone around". While some thunderstorms form, live and die at the same place, most such local storms drift with the wind at heights of one to three or more miles. Thunderstorms do not travel when the atmosphere is stagnant, nor when they are formed by the localized ascent of air about an isolated mountain on a quiet day. Such stationary thunderstorms may, however, grow laterally and give the appearance of slow approach.

Thunderstorms move with the current of air that involves the main body of the storm. If the cloud mass extends from one up to three or four miles above the ground, the motion of the storm is likely to be the average of the wind through this layer of air two or three miles thick. An excellent indication of this wind is the motion of alto-cumulus clouds, small fleecy clouds usually in groups, which usually occur at a height of two or three miles.

Fortunately, these thunderstorm drift indicators are usually present in thundery weather, so an observer can determine approximately not only the direction in which neighboring storms are moving, but also get some idea of their speed. When the alto-cumulus clouds are moving fast the thundershowers come up suddenly, but when these clouds are going slowly, one may have ample warning of a coming storm.

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