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A Science Service Feature

! WHY THE WEATHER !

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By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology

"TOO COLD TO SNOW"

The idea that the weather can be "too cold to snow" is a fallacy. The facts are these:

Most of our more or less heavy snows come with southerly to easterly winds, which, as a rule, are relatively mild. They occur chiefly at the front of a cyclonic disturbance, or storm area, advancing from west to east. Here the air is rising and cooling by expansion; hence conditions are favorable for rain or snow. In the eastern United States these southerly and easterly winds blow from the ocean and are heavily laden with moisture so that they are all the more likely to give abundant precipitation at the front of the storm.

As the storm passes the wind generally shifts to the northwest (or thereabouts). It is cold because it comes from a cold region. Partly because it blows into a warmer region and partly because it has a certain downward movement and is thus warmed by compression, this northwesterly wind tends to evaporate moisture rather than to condense it. Thus clearing skies and absence of snow are characteristic of the rear of winter storms.

Even in the heart of the polar regions in midwinter snow may fall, though it is always very light. In the terrific blizzards for which the Antarctic is famous most or all of the snow that fills the air is blown up from the ground.

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SCIENCE SERVICE,
21st and B Sts.,
Washington, D.C.