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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology

SUPERNUMERARY RAINBOWS

Everybody is familiar with the ordinary double rainbow. The inner or lower bow of the pair, which is always much the brighter of the two, is known as the "primary" rainbow. Outside and concentric with it is the fainter "secondary" rainbow.

There is a third kind of rainbow that is usually easy to see if you look for it, but that comparatively few people notice. Next time you see a pair of rainbows in the sky examine the inner (lower) edge of the primary. You will, if the rainbow is a bright one, probably discover that the prismatic colors, especially the reds and greens, are repeated in additional bands, parallel to the main bow. Sometimes there are two or more of these repetitions. In many cases similar extra bands of color are seen outside the secondary rainbow, but they are never seen on the inner edge of the secondary or on the outer edge of the primary. These are called "super-numerary" rainbows.

Every little while somebody happens to notice a supernumerary rainbow for the first time in his life, and rushes into print with a description of what he supposes to be a rare phenomenon, perhaps unknown to science. Some of these descriptions have appeared in scientific journals -- and even meteorological journals! One was published conspicuously the other day in American and Canadian newspapers. A super-numerary was seen on Lake Superior in connection with the ordinary primary and secondary rainbow, and the whole was described as a wonderful "triple rainbow".

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21st and B Sts.,
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