

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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CREPUSCULAR RAYS

Crepuscular rays are the beams of light that may sometimes be seen radiating from the sun when shining through breaks in clouds, or extending in a fan-like sheaf from the horizon before sunrise or after sunset. They are visible because of the presence of dust or of a fine haze of water drops in the atmosphere, while the dark spaces between them are the shadows of clouds or mountains. The beams are actually parallel; their apparent divergence is an effect of perspective. A rarer phenomenon is that of "antirepuscular rays", which appear to converge to a point on the horizon opposite the position of the sun. In this case the beams and shadows are projected entirely across the sky, but their paths can seldom be traced in the upper part of the heavens because in that direction the observer's line of sight passes through a comparatively shallow extent of dusty air.

When the sun is above the horizon and the rays are directed downward, the phenomenon is popularly described as ^{"the} sun drawing water", and is regarded as a sign of rain. The Homeric expression "rosy-fingered dawn" probably refers to crepuscular rays seen in the eastern sky before sunrise.

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