

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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SOUND AND UNSOUND WEATHER PROVERBS

Many of the familiar weather proverbs are sound, in the sense that they describe normal sequences of atmospheric events and thus furnish fairly trustworthy clues to coming weather. Even the best of them, however, are inferior in practical value to the information supplied by the daily weather map, as interpreted by a skilled forecaster. On the other hand many of these old maxims are wholly unfounded. Prof. W. I. Milham divides weather proverbs into five classes, of which he writes:

"The first two are fairly well founded, while the last three are mere superstitions. The first class includes those that infer an impending weather change from the sky appearance and something connected with the meteorological elements—for example: 'Rainbow in the morning, sailor take warning; rainbow at night, sailor's delight.' 'Mackerel scales and mares' tails make tall ships carry low sails.'

"The second class of weather proverbs includes those that infer the coming weather from the behavior of animals, plants and inanimate things. The coming of a low, with its rain area and shifting winds, is usually heralded by an increase of temperature and moisture and a decrease of pressure. The increase in temperature and moisture often causes a change in the behavior of animals. Drains are said to smell before rain, which may simply mean that the lower pressure causes some of the air to escape from them.

"The three classes of weather proverbs that have no scientific basis whatever are (1) those that infer the future weather at some distant date from the actions of animals or plants; (2) those that infer the distant future weather from the weather at some previous time; (3) those that infer the weather from some astronomical body. The following are examples: Squirrels gather more nuts before a hard winter. If it rains St. Swithin's Day it will rain 40 days. The moon and the weather change together.

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