

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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CLOUD CLASSIFICATION

The first classification of clouds that came into general use and the foundation of nearly all that have been subsequently used or proposed was that of Luke Howard, the English Quaker, introduced in 1803. It is based upon a recognition of the fact that cloud forms fall into three broadly distinct classes. Sometimes clouds are very light and wispy, spread in lines and patches with a texture resembling hair. At other times they are heaped up into mountainous masses. A third form is that of a more or less dense sheet or layer of cloud, which Howard seems to have identified with fog, though he may have had in mind horizontal sheets of low cloud whether resting on the ground, as fog, or lifted above it. To the first of these three types of cloud he gave the name "cirrus" (the Latin word for a wisp of hair); the second he called "cumulus" (meaning a heap); while the third was named "stratus", (which means "spread out"). Howard recognized a few intermediate types, to which he gave names formed by combining those above mentioned.

Since Howard's time scores of cloud types have been distinguished by particular names in various systems of classification, though the majority of these names have not come into general use. Many of the modern names of clouds are binomials, similar in form to the Latin names of plants and animals. Some of the different kinds of cirrus, for example, are called "Cirrus uncinus", "Cirrus undulatus", "Cirrus densus", etc.

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