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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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QUEER SOUNDS IN THE AIR

The atmosphere still harbors many mysteries; among which are various unexplained acoustic phenomena. Those to which scientific attention has most often been directed are the noises like muffled explosions, variously known as "brontides," "Barisal guns," "mistpoeffers," etc., but there are some of quite different character. Here, for example, is a curious observation recently reported to the American Meteorological Society by Travers Ewell, a consulting engineer who encountered the sound he describes in the deserts of northern Chile and Peru:

"Shortly after darkness sets in the mysterious sound begins. At first it is a sort of hum, fairly high-pitched, but weird, eerie and almost beautiful. Soon, mingled with the hum at regular intervals, there is a deep bass boom, like the far-off beating of a great drum. Sometimes the sound lasts for an hour or two; sometimes all night. I have heard it as often as three or four times a month. I have been told that the phenomenon is brought about by the movement of the sand under certain conditions of wind, temperature and humidity producing the proper vibrations. I know that on nights when the sound occurs there is a moderate southwest wind blowing, sufficient to move a film of sand along the surface."

Probably a case of "singing sands," but classifying the phenomenon does not explain it. Why do sands sing?

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