

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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FREAKY BALL LIGHTNING

Endlessly varied are the tricks of ball lightning. Here is a case reported by a Monsieur Wander to a French scientific meeting in 1848:

He was at a farm in the commune of Beugnon when a violent thunderstorm set in. Two children, 12 or 13 years old, were standing in the shelter of a stable doorway. From where they stood the farmyard sloped down a distance of twenty yards to a large pond, near which stood a poplar tree. Suddenly a ball of fire the size of an apple appeared at the summit of the tree. It was then seen to descend from branch to branch and to follow the trunk to the ground, along which it rolled very slowly, as if picking its way among the rain puddles, until it reached the stable door. One of the children was bold enough to touch it with his foot, when it instantly exploded with a terrific report. The children were knocked down without receiving any injury, but of 25 head of cattle that were in the stable at the time, 11 were killed!

Spallanzani, the eighteenth century Italian anatomist, has recorded the case of a peasant girl who, during a thunderstorm, saw a ball of fire as big as two fists roll over the ground to her bare feet. It disappeared under her skirts, which suddenly "ballooned" out, hoopskirt-fashion, and an instant later emerged from the neck of her bodice. She fell to the ground but was unharmed, and the only mark found on her body was a sort of scratch extending from her right knee to her breast. Her clothing was slightly torn.

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