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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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NOISE BEFORE A HAILSTORM

Many descriptions of hailstorms tell of a roaring or rattling sound heard during the approach of the storm and apparently coming from the clouds. Some writers compare it to that of heavy vehicles passing over a road or the clatter of many horses' hoofs. Typical of the accounts of it found in the older works on meteorology is the following from a once standard treatise by Professor Loomis:

"Some seconds before the fall of hail, and occasionally several minutes, a peculiar crackling noise is heard in the air. It has been compared to the noise of walnuts violently shaken up in a bag. This noise has been ascribed to the great velocity with which the hailstones are driven through the air, while some have ascribed it to feeble electrical discharges from one hailstone to another."

The noise has not been the subject of much critical investigation, but the best guess as to its origin is probably that offered as long ago as the year 1885 by the French meteorologist J.N. Plumandon. According to this authority it does not come from the air or the clouds, but is merely the combined sound of many hailstones falling on leaves, roofs and the like at some distance from the observer. When the storm is actually at hand, the observer hears the patter of individual stones in place of the mingled noises of a great number.

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