

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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CIRCLING FIRES

Some curious cases of circular air currents are indicated by the following note sent to a British journal from South Africa by F.C. Elliott Wilson:

"In the bush country located between Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, and a small village to the north called the Lonely Mine, during August, 1929, a big bush fire was raging, and there was a NNE wind blowing at about 25 miles an hour. The farmers in the district went out with their natives to points a couple of miles ahead of the fire and started to burn fire paths, keeping the fires they had made well under control to windward, when a strange effect of whirlwinds was observed. A whirlwind would start up and carry a column of fire and smoke first across wind, then do a left-hand circuit and make straight back toward the advancing fire, against wind. The flames were about 30 feet high, but smoke and burnt grass were carried upwards to over 2,000 feet.

"The second case in which exactly the same observations were made took place at the South African Air Force aerodrome, Pretoria, during June last year. The machine-gun target is located on the north side of the aerodrome, and on this particular day tracer bullets set fire to the grass. As there was a strong breeze blowing from the north, the fire soon spread across the whole field. Every available man was turned out to try to keep the fire from spreading across the whole area, and this could have been done if it had not been for the strange behavior of a lot of small whirlwinds, which, in several instances, carried the fire right round the fire-fighters, in a circle. Naturally the men had to run for their lives, as the flames were from four to six feet high. The débris in this case was carried up about 150 to 200 feet."

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