

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,  
Authority on Meteorology.

"SIGNS" OF WINTER WEATHER

Half-seriously and half-jokingly the newspapers publish every autumn dispatches from rural correspondents setting forth the predictions that farmers, hunters, trappers and others are supposed to have uttered concerning the kind of winter that is in store for us. These are based on the thickness of animal furs and corn husks; the dates when geese migrated and beavers built their winter homes; the amount of nuts and seeds stored up by squirrels; the height of hornets' nests above the ground; the coloration of "woolly bear" caterpillars -- and so on, through a long list.

Longfellow writes of some of these traditional portents of winter weather in "Evangeline":

"All the signs foretold a winter long and inclement,  
Bees, with prophetic instinct of want, had hoarded their honey  
Till the hives overflowed; and the Indian hunters asserted  
Cold would the winter be, for thick was the fur of the foxes."

None of these reputed weather signs are of any value whatever. Bees have no "prophetic instinct of want." The thickness of an animal's fur may, perhaps, be influenced by weather that is past and gone, but affords no clue to that of the future. The early migration of birds may be due to an early cold snap in the autumn, but does not mean that the winter will be unusually severe.

People put their faith in these signs today because ages ago, when there was no science to offset superstition, all kinds of future events -- not merely weather events -- were supposed to be foretold by tokens that Nature placed in the heavens above and on the earth beneath for the guidance of mankind. A comet was believed to foretell a coming war. Why should not a thick corn husk foretell a hard winter?

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