

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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CLOUDBURSTS

A cloudburst is an excessively heavy local downpour of rain, of comparatively brief duration. In its intensity and its concentration in space and time it bears much the same relation to a widespread heavy rainstorm as does a tornado to an ordinary cyclonic storm. The name of the phenomenon is popular rather than scientific and no hard-and-fast definition of this name has ever been adopted by meteorologists. Some authorities have proposed definite minimum rates of rainfall for the showers thus designated, while others regard the distinctive feature of a cloudburst to be the fall of water in masses rather than in separate drops.

It should be noted, however, that in popular usage the term "cloudburst" is often applied to showers of relatively moderate intensity occurring in dry mountainous regions, where they cause spectacular short-lived floods, owing to the rapid flow of the storm water down the bare slopes and its concentration in ravines and canyons. Many floods of this character have been very destructive. Among them was the one that wiped out a large part of the town of Heppner, Oregon, in June, 1903, causing the death of 200 people. This disaster figures in the list of famous American cloudbursts, but an investigation made immediately after the storm by J.T. Whistler, of the United States Geological Survey, proved that the rain causing it was not exceptionally heavy.

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