

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed May 11, 1933

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RAIN IN DEATH VALLEY

Writing of the climate of Death Valley, California, America's most famous desert, E.E. Eklund, of the U.S. Weather Bureau, says:

"Although many persons have died, no doubt, on account of the heat in Death Valley, it is probable that by far the greater number of tragic deaths have been from thirst. Drinkable water is not obtained readily and to the unfortunate travelers in Death Valley rain would have been a godsend, but the records indicate that it would sometimes be a long while between drinks if dependence were placed upon the occurrence of rain in sufficient quantity to allay thirst. Recently the statement was made by one who should have been better informed that rain never falls in Death Valley because the water evaporates before it reaches the ground. To be sure the average precipitation is light but the situation is hardly as bad as this statement indicates. Several times in the last 20 years one could have visited Death Valley for 6 months or more at a time and, based on his own observations, could have said truthfully that no rain falls there. He could have spent the whole year of 1929 there without seeing even a drop of rain and had this stay included part of December, 1928, and part of January, 1930, the visitor would have witnessed 401 consecutive days on which no measurable precipitation occurred."

The normal annual rainfall at the official weather station in this valley -- Greenland Ranch, alias Furnace Creek Ranch -- is lower than at any other American weather station, the latest figure being 1.45 inches. Four times, however, during the last 20 years as much as an inch has fallen within 24 hours. On November 9, 1923, a fall of 1.40 inches was recorded, and a fall of 0.30 inch on the following day may have occurred within the same 24-hour period, though this is uncertain as the time of occurrence was not recorded.

Heavy local showers, resulting chiefly from summer thunderstorms, occur in the surrounding mountains, producing torrents that discharge into the valley, where they sometimes do considerable damage to roads.

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