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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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DUST WHIRLS

Among the most striking natural phenomena of dry regions are dust whirlwinds or columns of whirling dust-filled air, a few inches to several feet in diameter and from a few feet to hundreds of feet in height. They may be seen nearly every hot day, sometimes running rapidly over the surface, sometimes remaining almost stationary, but never losing their rapid rotation. Usually they last but a few moments, but they are occasionally of long duration. One observed in Egypt lasted over five hours.

These whirls, which in the Anglo-East are often called "devils" or bear an oriental name (such as "shaitan") of equivalent meaning, are largest and last longest on the flat, bare plains of the desert and are usually seen when the air is calm or when only a light breeze is blowing, though their occurrence in windy weather is not unknown. Their direction of rotation may be either "clockwise" or "counter-clockwise," regardless of the hemisphere in which they occur.

Cases have been reported in which there were several of these whirls, each of which revolved rapidly about its own center, while they all moved about a common center in a small circle. There is at least one record of a system of water-spouts that behaved in the same manner.

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