

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

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Authority on Meteorology

The clouds that you see apparently lying along the horizon are really far beyond it. For a person whose eye is 5 feet above a level plain or the ocean the horizon, where sky and earth appear to meet, is a little less than 3 miles away. Along the horizon he may see the feathery plumes of cirrus clouds. Assuming an average height for such clouds above the earth -- say 35,000 feet -- they are about 200 miles away from the observer. The summit of a huge thunderhead projecting above the horizon may be anywhere from 100 to 150 miles away, or even farther.

Another interesting fact about clouds on the horizon is that only when thus seen do they give us a correct idea of the ratio between their vertical and horizontal dimensions. Elsewhere in the sky they are more or less foreshortened vertically. Because of the different angles at which it is seen, the apparent shape of a cloud varies strikingly as it passes from the horizon to the zenith or vice versa. For the same reason clouds with open spaces between them appear to coalesce into a continuous sheet when seen far from the zenith.

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