

Weather Lore

Mares' Tails. Sun Dogs. Pimpernel. Mackerel Sky. Diamond Dust. Are these the fruits of a child's imagination? A collection of unusual critters in a zoo? Weather words? If you selected the last, you are correct! Perhaps not as scientific as "foraminifera," "microburst," or "pileus," but these terms are equally as meaningful to those who use them to describe existing or predicted meteorological events.

Beginning unnumbered years ago, man has needed to forecast the weather, both short- and long-term. Survival often depended upon it: completing a journey before a storm gathered its fury around him; planting and harvesting crops for food throughout the year; skillfully managing water for irrigation purposes. But until the relatively recent advances in scientific weather prediction and the means of mass communication to disseminate the facts, where did he turn to gather this crucial information?

With fancy barometers, digital thermometers, and hi-tech anemometers not in the picture, man sought his answers in the world around him—in Nature. An already-intimate relationship with Mother Nature existed: she clothed him, sheltered him, and healed him. Why then, wouldn't she not only help him understand the environment in which he lived, but also provide clues for unraveling—and perhaps even predicting—some of the mysteries around him?

The term *meteorology* comes from the Greeks (often credited to Plato), who used it to define the study of natural phenomena that took place in that realm that lies above the Earth's surface and below the sphere of the moon's orbit. There were three types of "meteors" the Greeks examined: "aqueous," referring to precipitation; "aerial," referring to wind; and "luminous," referring to events as rainbows, halos, and northern lights.

Passing from generation to generation, some of the centuries-old observations that were correlated to weather events still endure today. Some people dismiss them as old lore with no validity, yet many cling to them with firm expectations of accuracy equal to—or surpassing—those of the "modern" forecasts. Probably each position deserves some credence: many of the sayings have, over the course of time, shown to be no more than myths; however, there are certainly others that, now that we can apply a scientific

explanation to them, have real merit. Let's take a look at some of those expressions which, although their roots lie in tradition, actually *do* have confirmed basis.

If the new moon holds the old moon in her bosom, the weather will be fair. The old moon can be seen in the dark part of the crescent moon when there is clear stable air ahead of a high pressure system. Count on 24-48 hours of dry weather to follow.

Mares' tails and mackerel scales make tall ships carry low sails. Referring to the part of cirrus clouds that trails behind when it encounters winds that are slower than those pushing the main portion of the cloud, mares' tails are a precursor to a change in the weather. When seen with the lumpy altocumulus clouds that look like mackerel scales, a sailor knew that within 12 to 36 hours, the weather would become too rough to be out in open water.

Circle around the moon, rain or snow soon and if the moon shows a silver shield, be not afraid to reap your field; but if she rises haloed around, soon we'll tread on deluged ground. In advance of a storm, the high, thin cirrus and cirrostratus clouds often create a halo (or circle) around the moon. Ice crystals in the clouds refract the light, forming the ring. The number of stars within the ring can help predict how many hours away the snow or rain is: each star represents about 24 hours (give a faint star twelve hours for good measure!).

Sea gull, sea gull, sit on the sand; it's a sign of rain when you are at hand and Birds flying low, expect rain and a blow. Birds are more apt to roost during periods of low pressure—stormy weather—than during those of high pressure. That they settle on land or travel closer to the ground can be attributed to more difficult flying conditions because of the thinning air density and the diminution of natural updrafts of which the birds can take advantage when flying.

A cow with its tail to the west, makes the weather the best; a cow with its tail to the east, makes weather the least. Grazing animals tend, by instinct, to forage with their tails to the wind so that they can face a possible invader they can't smell; the scent from a predator from behind is carried to the animals on the wind. Since a west wind usually brings fair weather and an east wind brings rain, the animals' position becomes a weather indicator.

When spider webs in air do fly, the spell will soon be very dry. Look for spider webs with small spiders affixed to them on dry, autumn days.

By spinning webs and "launching" themselves into a breeze, these small arachnids are able to migrate.

Red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky at morning, all sailors take warning and Evening red and morning gray, send the traveler on his way; evening gray and morning red, brings the rain down on his head. High pressure systems—and dry weather—push dust ahead of them. Sun shining through this dust creates the red sky. On the other hand, during a forthcoming storm, the sun shining through the dust in the morning, creating the red sky, indicates an approaching low pressure system and rainy weather. (Don't confuse a red sky with a red sun in the morning. The latter is the sign of a dry day ahead.)

Sun dog: The equivalent of a ring around the moon, a sun dog is a white band or rainbow circling the sun and indicates a dramatic change of weather within 12 to 24 hours. The change may be from rainy to sunny, foggy to clear, or fair to stormy.

Pimpernel, pimpernel, tell me true, whether the weather be fine or no; no heart can think, no tongue can tell, the virtues of the pimpernel. The pimpernel, sometimes referred to as "the poor man's weatherglass," is a plant known to close its flowers when the humidity reaches about 80% and during bad weather.

Flowers and plants: Tulips, clovers, dandelions, chickweed, and other plants tend to fold up their petals prior to rain. Keep an eye on rhododendron leaves: at 20°F, they are tightly curled up; when the temperature reaches 60°F, they will be fully open.

Animals: Birds tend to roost earlier and eat more in advance of snow or rain. Squirrels prepare nests with extra insulating capacity before cold weather. If you count the number of times a cricket chirps in 15 seconds and add 37 to that number, you can determine the temperature where it is. The call of a bird sounds clearer and louder when stormy weather is on its way because the sound is "bent back to earth" instead of traveling upward and outward into the atmosphere.

Humans: If you hear someone complain of joints aching before a rain, it is probably because the gases in the body expand due to decreased atmospheric pressure, resulting in pain for the person.

Make your time outdoors even more rewarding: see if you can forecast the weather with the

accuracy of your forebears! Not only can you challenge yourself in a fun manner, but you will also find yourself observing Nature in a new way—and perhaps starting a relationship with her that has an intimacy that began centuries ago.