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If people can hear thunder they generally are close enough to be struck by lightning.

Lightning safety critical in rainy season

Mark Rackay

Tips from the Posse

During the late summer months is when we enter the monsoon season here in Western Colorado. Our "rainy season" of sorts brings us some special areas of concern as we recreate in the outdoors. These storms generally build up in the early afternoon hours and can last well into the night. These storms can produce an incredible amount of lightning, both in the cloud to ground and cloud-to-cloud types. Lightning is one of the greatest and deadliest hazards we can face.

One of the ways to stay safe is to pay close attention to the ever-changing sky. For example, the earlier in the day that the clouds start to build usually means that the storms will arrive earlier. When the sky has lots of those cumulus clouds, the greater the risk of thunderstorms developing later in the day. Watch for those clouds to begin to develop vertically. When they develop a dark base it is a sign that rain is coming soon. The darker the base and the taller the cloud, usually means a strong thunderstorm is on the way. These storms can produce torrential rainfall, hail, strong gusty winds and deadly lightning.

If you find yourself outdoors when the storm is upon you, here are a few things to help keep you safe. If you have a vehicle or building available, get in it. Stay away from things like ATVs, motorcycles, fences or other metal objects. Stay out of and away from water.

If you are along a ridge try to get down as soon as possible. Avoid lone trees and flat areas such as mountain parks. Being in a grove of trees of similar height would be a better choice. Anywhere you can lay as low as possible will add to your safety but watch for dry streambeds as flash flooding can occur.

Lightning bolts can have over a million volts of electricity. These bolts can strike from more than 5 miles away from the storm, sometimes even farther. The most dangerous time for a lightning strike is before the storm, usually before any heavy rainfall. Lightning usually is along the leading edge or the tail end of a thunderstorm.

Lightning that flashes below the horizon is usually referred to as heat lightning. This is actually lightning that is associated with a storm that is miles away, beyond the line of sight of the horizon. It is so far away that you cannot hear the thunder. The center of these type of storms can be as far as 50 miles away.

You can roughly estimate the distance that a storm is away from you. Simply count the seconds between the flash of lightning and when you hear the clap of thunder. Every five seconds equals one mile.

Therefore, when the time between the flash and the clap of thunder is 25 seconds, the storm is roughly five miles away.

Lightning can be visible for up to 60 miles but the sound of thunder usually only 12 miles.

A good rule of thumb is if you can hear the thunder, you are in range to be struck by lightning.

Being alert of the clouds before the storms develop is the best way to stay safe. And don't forget to have a decent set of rain gear.

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