

GUIDE TO THE OUTDOORS FROM THE SHERIFF'S POSSE: LIGHTNING!



Colorado thunderstorm. Courtesy photo Mark Rackay.



Funnel cloud. Courtesy photo Mark Rackay.

By Mark Rackay

COLORADO-The chance of getting struck by lightning is about one in 10,000. With that statistic in mind, I have been hit twice. Both were on the water while I was offshore fishing in the Florida Keys and neither was a direct hit. Had either been a direct hit, someone else would be writing this column.

Of all outdoor hazards we face in Colorado, lightning is the number one killer, killing an average of three people annually. Our state sees around 500,000 cloud-to-ground lightning strikes each year. The State of Colorado ranks third in the nation of most lightning fatalities. Florida is far and away in first, followed by Texas.

Thunderstorms can occur any time of the year but are most common during our summer months. The National Weather Service states that 70 percent of all lightning fatalities occur during June, July and August. Those summer months are when most of us are in the high country recreating, so some situational awareness is called for.

Lightning can strike more than 10 miles away from the center of a thunderstorm, well beyond the audible range of thunder.

Most bolts occur along the edges of the storm. Even though the storm is past your location, you are still in danger of a lightning strike.

My intimate friend and constant companion, Mr. Murphy, founder of Murphy's Law, knows that I will be caught outside when a storm approaches. In the event a storm catches you, here are a few things you can do to protect yourself:

Avoid shelters with exposed openings such as picnic pavilions and camping shelters. Lightning can channel through the openings.

Do not have close contact with the other members of your group. Spread out at least 50 feet apart to minimize the chance of everyone in the group being struck. Get away from water. Stay away from low spots that might accumulate rain runoff. Avoid a lone tree, or a small group of trees in the open at all costs. Also, stay away from any object that is higher than the surrounding terrain. A group of small trees among taller trees, or a thick forest, is a much better choice. Drop and move away from all metal objects such as trekking poles and pack frames. Stay far away from

ATV's when in a storm.

There are several types of lightning strikes. The most deadly is the direct strike. This one has a bolt on you that carries a million volts and exceeds 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The direct is the most rare but if you are chosen, survival is near impossible.

Side flashes are more common. When lightning strikes a taller object, such as a tree near the victim, a portion of the current jumps from the taller object and strikes the victim. Most side flash victims have taken shelter under a tree to avoid the rain.

Conduction lightning strikes are the last we will discuss here, but there are several other types of strikes. Lightning is not attracted to metal but metal provides a path for it to follow. Conduction lightning strikes can travel long distances in wires or metal plumbing. Most indoor lightning casualties occur when someone comes in contact with something connected to metal wires.

You are twice as likely to be killed by a tornado, hurricane or flood than being struck by lightning. However, in the high country where you are sometimes in the center of the storm exists, your chances increase greatly.

Give old Murphy the dust off this season and pay attention to those thickening clouds and claps of thunder. Stay safe and enjoy the outdoors.

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