



In the dry climate of Colorado, a broken cloud sky like this in the morning indicates fair weather. (Photo/Rackay)

Reading the Weather



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

From my own records, I would offer that 50 percent of the cases involving a person needing assistance in the woods, the weather or weather changes, played a big part in their predicament. Even the missions where weather did not directly cause the incident, as in the case of a lost person on a bright and sunny day, the weather can still play a part. A cold front could move in, making a routine search a 3-alarm emergency to get to the person before the elements do.

I have always been an advocate of “check the forecast before you go,” that is up until the winter of 2022 into 2023. That winter, I have never seen such a collection of wrong forecasts in my life. Even a person who took a “wild guess” should be right 50

percent of the time. Not the meteorologist that forecast around here. How these people can be so wrong consistently and still have a job baffles the mind.

I read a statistic, given by the National Weather Service that stated the 7-day forecast is accurate 80% of the time, and the 5-day forecast 90% of the time. If you believe that number, better stay away from the blackjack tables. Compare the 7-day forecast every evening for a week and see how much it changes every day.

You head to the hills for a week of camping fun, and before you left, you looked at that 7-day forecast, and all is right with the world. You may not have the ability to check forecasts daily and keep up with the rapidly changing weather while you are there. There are some things you can learn to monitor in the outdoor world around you that can keep you in tune the weather changes, and you know it is going to change.

Old timers used to be pretty accurate predicting the weather by just watching the clouds and other signs nature gives off. Some of these weather lore saying still hold true today. Most people know that red sky at night is a sailor's delight,

while red sky in morning, sailor take warning.

A red sky at dawn and dusk is caused by high pressure in the atmosphere trapping particles of dust and soot. Particles of dust and soot scatter the longer red wavelengths of sunlight. When the sun is lowest in the sky, more sunlight travels through more of the atmosphere, scattering more of this light. High-level clouds further enhance the reddish light and reflect it back to the ground.

One thing you can pay attention to while outdoors is pressure changes. Low pressure usually means rain or snow, potentially bad weather, while high pressure means fair conditions. A change in the pressure means the weather is going to change.

One sure indicator is your campfire smoke. When the smoke in not directly blowing in my face, no matter where I move, it usually goes straight up (assuming no wind.) If it rises and seems to hit a ceiling, fanning out, that is a sign of falling pressure, and a change is on the way. If the smoke goes straight up in a column, that is a fair-weather sign.

You can watch the behavior of the animals

and get a good indication change is on the way. Birds, for example, perch more before a storm. Deer and elk will often feed more, and often in the middle of the day, when they know a storm is approaching.

When you hear sounds in the distance, that you normally would not hear, it means air pressure is falling. Sounds travel farther when the pressure is falling. This may not always be reliable because wind speed and direction can also affect what you hear. For example, if you hear a train whistle from a town down in the valley, that you normally don't hear, it could mean a front is coming.

Flies are always present in camp, especially when you start cooking. When a storm is approaching, flies will become noticeably more numerous and very difficult to shoo away. This is a sign rain is coming.

Summertime clouds are something to watch always. Those big and puffy cumulus clouds floating around here and there don't mean much to worry about.

When they start to grow tall and become more numerous, better start paying attention. Whenever you see that big cloud in the distance, and the top starts

to anvil out, best batten the hatches, a storm is coming.

Many folks suffer from arthritis. Some of them can predict a weather change accurately because of joints that become achy. What is possibly happening is low pressure allows body tissues to expand, putting extra pressure on joints.

First thing in the morning, look at the grass around your campsite. As ground surfaces cool, such as during a clear night, dew forms. This tends to mean that a clear day is ahead. Remember, the weather doesn't change where you are unless something changes it, such as a low-pressure system moving in.

If you have a keen sense of smell, you can utilize your forecasting skills even more. If the flora and fauna around you smell stronger than usual, that is a good indicator that things are going to change. If you smell something “earthy” like a compost smell, that is because a changing air pressure is releasing odors previously held closer to the ground by higher pressure.

Learn from your own personal experience about subtle signs that tip you off about a change in the weather. Some people may

get a slight headache when there is a pressure change and rain is moving in. My dogs get slightly restless before a stormfront blows in. You have to pay attention to their behavior changes closely in order to notice it, and it does not work every time.

Staying alert for weather changes while in the great outdoors can save your life. Getting caught unprepared for a storm has taken many lives away. Use all your senses to watch for subtle signs and changes, smells, sights, and distinct sounds, to help keep you alert for changes in the weather. By not being taken by surprise, you can be prepared. And don't put all your faith in that 7-day forecast.

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