

IF THE FROG CROAKS ...

Through word of mouth and research I found the sky could be used as a weather informer. You've heard the saying, "Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning". This means that high pressure, dusty air has been pushed eastward of you, possibly letting in more humid air. Rain is especially probably within a couple of days after a red morning if you see high, wispy stratus clouds thickening the day after a pink-hued sunrise.

A gray sunset and pink sunrise put two rainy signals in sequence: "Evening gray and morning red, shower rain upon your head." A gray evening sky following a cloudy day offers strong evidence of inbound rain. The sky is loaded with humidity and droplets looking for a place to condense.

Another saying dealing with sailors and weather is "Red sky at night, sailors delight". This indicates fair, high pressure to the west. Dry dust particles suspended in the air give the air a pinkish glow. However, a vivid crimson in the sunset sky indicates high humidity to the west and suggests rain. Most weather systems in our area move in from west to east. Ice crystals in the high atmosphere west of you act like a prism, showing you the red spectrum from your point of view. One of the surest signs of dry air is a glimpse of the green spectrum just as the sun's rim dips below the horizon.

For those who are not into watching sunsets and sunrises, there is another weather indicator above you - the clouds. High clouds are a sign of light humidity in the air and a high "dewpoint". A high cloud ceiling indicates that air has to rise a long way and cool considerably before reaching the dewpoint and condensing. A lowering cloud ceiling indicates rain. You'll see the ceiling drop, for instance, when a warm front advances over you.

Cold front clouds foretell a quick, violent storm. Your first warning is puffy cumulus clouds that grow thicker and more turbulent. Then, usually in the west, you'll see a mass of dark clouds, often capped by an "anvil" tip pointed your way. The wall of clouds boils, crackles with lightning and pushes a lower, flat-bottomed "line squall" cloud ahead of it. As you face such a system invading you from the west, the surface wind will often sweep out of the south. Clouds overhead may be moving a different direction than the surface winds. Then the wall of thunderclouds hits, usually moving 30 mph or faster. The wind veers toward the north and by that time you've probably got the pedal to the metal on the Cushman and heading for the shop. Cold front clouds aren't very subtle, but they vigorously scrub the heavens and bring you clear cooler air in their wake.

The first clouds showing up on the other edge of an advancing warm front are the cirrus, up above 18,000 ft. where ice crystals form. At night, cirrus-"mares' tails" - give the moon a soft, out-of-focus glow, then patches of lower clouds move in. You won't actually see a sloping wedge with a warm front because the slope is gradual, about 1 in 200. The leading edge of a warm front may be 200 miles past you before the ceiling lowers from 18,000 ft. down to 8,000 ft. These lower clouds are altocumulus. Surface turbulence and increasing humidity combine to make them white and fluffy at first, then gradually thicker and darker. Now you can step up the odds to about 30% for rain within 24 hours. The satellite photos on TV at this stage of a warm front's advance will usually show a heavy overcast not far behind the gathering altocumulus. These are stratus, a laden, dull overcast that seems to absorb the altocumulus. Gradually humidity increases and a slow drizzle begins as the dragging tail of the

warm front starts to pass. All the signs of warm front activity can tell you 24 to 48 hours ahead that a long, slow fertilizer soaking rain is likely.

If you're not really into looking at clouds, there are other methods of weather forecasting. One of these are barnyard animals. At the time of this writing I have been unable to convince my green committee chairman the need of a herd of cattle, hogs, sheep, horses or goats. If you have a more liberal chairman, here are some animal characteristics to look for in predicting weather:

CATTLE: A sharp drop in atmospheric pressure makes cattle more excitable and aggressive. As a storm nears, a cow herd on pasture or fairways will bunch up and graze earnestly; calves will stick closer to their mothers. Range, or rough, cattle tend to graze downhill toward valleys, often with their backs to the wind. In a long warm-front drizzle, cattle continue grazing.

HOGS: Traditionally, hogs have been able to "see the wind". Pastured hogs trot anxiously along fence lines as a low intensifies. Some start looking for shelter, root around, don't replace divots or carry wisps of grass as an instinctive throwback to the nestbuilding of wild ancestors. Confined hogs may become noisier or more frustrated, fighting more often.

BIRDS: Birds tend to flock together and roost or fly low to the ground before an advancing storm. Robins take shelter in trees and bushes. Humid, low-pressure air is less dense and harder to fly in. On fair, high-pressure days, birds fly higher. Crows which especially hate to fly in bad weather, perch when a storm approaches. Folk wisdom listens to crows "calling for rain". Sparrows are likely to assemble on electrical wires and chatter about an incoming storm. If it's a warm front with leaden skies, this will happen up to a day or more before rain arrives.

INSECTS: Crickets are nature's thermometer. Count the number of times a black field cricket chirps in 14 seconds. Then add 40 to that count. You will have a total within two or three degrees of your thermometer reading. If not, your thermometer or your counting is off, not the cricket. Remember, the cricket may be in a cool corner while your thermometer is up where it's warmer. When the temperature drops to the mid-50's, bees get mean, ants stay underground and flies gang up and struggle to pry open your screen door. Flies also get either more desperate or irritated before a storm. They get "sticky", biting ravenously. Ants reinforce their hills and cover their holes before a storm. A line of ants carrying eggs to higher ground is a sure sign of a gully-washing, sand-trap-eroding, toad-strangling storm. Night crawlers, of course, show up after a rain, but they're also more likely to emerge on nights before a rain. Last, but not least, we get to the woolly bear caterpillar. The woolly bear caterpillar is an inch or two long, including fuzz at both ends. There's some evidence that the wider his brown band in the middle, the milder the winter. If the black on both ends crowds the band down to less than a third of his body length by autumn, expect a chilly winter.

All of these weather forecasters are somewhat valid and truthful. Clouds may be more valid than sparrows but I wouldn't sit under an electrical line before a storm. There is no better way to predict weather than to watch professional meteorologists. On the other hand, if you hear the frog croak, bring your umbrella.

Credit - Minnesota Hole Notes
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