

# The light and dark sides of weather forecasting

## SECOND IN A TWO-PART SERIES

When the survivor is stranded in the bush for an extended period of time, other factors undoubtedly hinder the victim's chances of survival.

Besides coping with bugs, pain, hunger, depression, loneliness, stress and boredom, another element comes into play: the weather.

In the best of times, our climactic conditions play havoc with someone's short-term stay in the wilderness. The weather compounds the situation when a victim realizes that he may not be found for many days. Hence, having the ability to predict the weather will undoubtedly aid the survivor by helping him to be better prepared to face the elements. If knowing the upcoming weather, he can construct an appropriate shelter, harvest food, insulate his bedding area, or gather dry firewood. If camping or canoeing, the outdoorsperson can take any necessary precautions if a storm is known to be approaching.

Besides, it's a great skill to master, and could provide some rather light-hearted moments in the field. In Part 1 of this series, I promised to relate a rather humorous incident regarding weather prediction.

Last summer, I accompanied two colleagues, Mark and Murray, on a memorable sailing adventure. Leaving Owen Sound one sunny morning, we traveled to Rochester, NY, to see "Snoopy", Mark's newly-acquired sailboat. Plans were for us to sail her from Rochester to Trenton, Ont., straight across Lake Ontario, follow the Trent-Severn system to Georgian Bay, then head west to Owen Sound. The entire trip was to last seven or eight days.

Once all gear and supplies were stowed on board, we set sail, heading due north towards the Canadian shoreline, approximately 90 kilometres

away. The weather was perfect and we decided to forego the use of modern navigational tools and utilize the setting sun and later, Polaris, to guide us to Trenton. We landed by daybreak, less than a kilometre from our destination.

The days on the system were uneventful — we marveled at the various locks that dotted the entire waterway, wildlife was exceptional, with nesting Ospreys a daily sight. The days and nights eventually became very hot and humid and we boiled on the boat. By the time we reached Rice Lake, the heat, deer flies and Mark's cooking had become unbearable.

One sunny morning, as we neared the end of a large body of water, I noticed the bright red sky. As well, all along the shores, deciduous trees seemed different — their leaves were curling and the winds had shifted. The winds were now blowing from the east-southeast.

That morning, I commented to Mark and Murray that a major thunderstorm was imminent. Pointing to the cloudless sky, both gentlemen cracked up laughing. Mark, a mechanic by trade, a teacher by profession, and a comic at heart, could not stop laughing. Murray, a school administrator, cast his unbelieving eyes my way. "And when is this thunderstorm supposed to strike?"

"10:25 pm", was my answer. More uncontrolled laughter. Little did they know that I randomly picked this odd number out of nowhere. Although I knew that it would eventually rain later that day, the guess was sheer serendipity.

By late afternoon heavy clouds had moved in. Several hours later we docked in a sheltered area. The winds had died down completely. Later, they picked up again. At exactly 10:23 pm, raindrops were falling, at which time,

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Mark bellowed "What kind of crappy weatherman are you? Your prediction was two minutes off. How can I ever believe you again?"

We all chuckled over hot chocolate that night, as thunder boomed overhead, lightning lit up the dark skies and rain pummeled the boat.

### SUMMARY OF WEATHER FORECASTING TIPS

1. It may rain within 24 hours if:
  - Leaves show their backs.
  - There is a ring around the moon.
  - The sun sets with a heavy concentration of clouds.
  - Winds blow from the east-south-east.
  - Smoke settles close to the ground.
  - Birds fly low.
  - Unusual and hyperactivity involving birds and insects.
  - Dry grass in early morning, total absence of dew.
  - Red sky in the morning.
  - Complete calm, with unusual big and bird activity.
  - Sound carries for longer distances.
  - Odors become stronger due to low pressure areas.
2. The weather may be fair if:
  - Smokes rises.
  - Unusual cricket activity at night.
  - Cicadas "singing" in the morning.

- Red sky at night.
- Heavy coat of dew on grass in the morning.

- Sky is a deep indigo blue.
- Winds blow from the north-north-west.

3. During the winter months:

- Sun dogs (rainbow-coloured arcs on either side of halo) appear around the sun. This is a sign of an approaching cold front.

- If it's cloudy and smoke rises, there is a high probability of snow.

- When the neighbouring large bodies of waters surrounding this region don't freeze up, expect some terrible snowstorms.

My humorous weather-related sailing "tall tale" story is about to be balanced with another incident that occurred during one of my wilderness survival courses.

Although it took place more than 25 years ago, so deeply has this experience etched itself in my brain that I can recall the pertinent details as if they occurred only yesterday.

During the early 1980's, I resided in northwestern Ontario and was very familiar with the area. A European outdoor adventure group had called months in advance, hiring my company to teach them a realistic wilderness survival course. They wanted to become fully immersed in an actual simulation. Their outdoor experiences and credentials were impeccable.

Following a series of long-distance phone interviews, we decided on the course dates and location: late July, 150 km north and east of Atikokan, Ont.

My three-man instructional team arrived in Thunder Bay a week before the nine-day wilderness survival course was to take place. I knew the area very well and took the team to the

proposed survival site, where they familiarized themselves with the numerous lakes, rivers and trails that honeycomb this rugged stretch of land.

When our clients arrived, we went to great lengths to explain all aspects of the course, including safety issues, syllabus and travel plans. Three days later, we were in the bush. The weather was great, but the bugs were horrendous. Everyone was in good spirits. Between participating in activities such as shelter construction, fire starting, plant identification, foraging and primitive living-skills, our clients took time to swim in the cool, pristine lake on a regular basis.

By the eighth day, signs of fatigue were present. Everyone was tired.

That day, the skies were absolutely still and bugs were more ferocious than normal. The winds, now blowing from the southeast, suddenly became lifeless. We knew we were in for a major storm and proceeded to tell everyone to get into their shelters. Everyone did and a few minutes later, ferocious thunderclaps were everywhere, as a violent storm tore through our somewhat protected area. We were thankful to be sheltered from the howling winds, bright flashes of lightning and sheets of pouring rain. I was awestruck by nature's power and majesty.

The storm lasted all night long, and thoroughly soaked everyone. By morning, the sun was shining as brightly as ever. Tired, wet and exhausted, we eventually reached our vehicles and drove to Thunder Bay.

Thank goodness my instructors were weather savvy, otherwise I dread to think of what might have happened if, when the storm hit, we were swimming in the lake or out in the open. This thought still haunts me today.

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