

INSTANT WEATHER

By: John Winters

Quick, what are the eight signs that the weather is going to deteriorate?

If you don't know them you may be asking for trouble. The vast majority of sea kayaking accidents are the result of paddlers being caught in bad weather for which they were unprepared or lacked skills to handle. Fortunately most can be avoided if you are observant and know eight simple rules.

I know what you are thinking, "Why do I need to know anything when I have my weather radio?" The first reason is that knowing the natural signs don't require batteries. The second, and more important, is that radio reports cover large geographical areas and may not apply to your specific locality. To deal with purely local conditions and to cover oneself in the event of battery failure one needs to know the signs leading up to bad weather. You just can't depend on the radio. How many times have you heard, "The radio didn't say anything about thunderstorms." Or, "It isn't supposed to rain today." Environment Canada does a pretty good job and if you follow the [MAFOR](#) reports (Do you know how to interpret them?) you will have a good idea of the general weather patterns but the Government can't be everywhere (unless they are collecting taxes)

Why just the signs for bad weather? Because if the weather is getting better you don't have much to worry about and, if it is stable, you know what you have to deal with and won't be surprised.

So, what are the eight rules?

The Weather will turn worse if:

- Stratus clouds move in under cirrus clouds and get thicker and denser.
- Clouds begin to grow vertically as high cumulus clouds. This is particularly true if they start building early in the day.
- There is a line of dark heavy clouds to the west.
- The sun or moon are fuzzy discs or have halos.
- The wind increases in conjunction with thickening clouds.
- The wind backs (shifts in a counterclockwise direction) from southwest to south and then to east.
- The temperature is unusually cold or warm for the time of year.
- The barometer falls steadily and particularly if at a rate exceeding 2.03 millibars per hour.

One of these signs by itself may not be conclusive evidence of problems to come but you should at least be cautious. Stay close to shore and do not try any long open-water crossings where you are more than a fifteen minute paddle from shore. Two or more signs are almost a sure thing and you might seriously consider staying ashore unless you will always have quick access to shelter or a landing.

Clever people will note that what you observe at the moment is less important than the changes you observe. This means you must be constantly aware of how the sky, wind, temperature and pressure are changing. Even though fast moving cold fronts travel at between 40 and 48 kilometers per hour you still have time to get to safety if you have been observant.

Don't have a barometer? Few people do. Fortunately Casio makes a waterproof wristwatch-barometer-altimeter-coffee maker-Fax machine combination that makes up in convenience what it lacks in absolute accuracy. Fortunately you don't need to know the exact barometric pressure but only how rapidly it is changing and the Casio watch does that well enough. They are available at some camping boutique stores and even some kayaking stores. It does need batteries.

Even if you are good at instant weather forecasting you will still need that life jacket. No one can predict what a drunken power boater will do.

One last thing. If nothing else, my thirty-five years of boat-building and working with power tools has taught me that the first aid kit is a poor substitute for keeping your finger out of the saw. Safe paddling is much the same. Knowing how to roll is valuable and having a deck festooned with rescue gear might be useful but none of it is as valuable as knowing when not to tempt fate.

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