

Lightning Safety Awareness Week

June 22-28, 2008

<http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov>

Lightning in Montana

Lightning is one of the most dangerous natural phenomena on this planet. It occurs when large regions of charge on ice particles are separated by the updraft in a thunderstorm, a process somewhat similar to the shock experienced when rubbing a blanket on your hair. Montana has had 10 reported deaths and 28 reported injuries from lightning, with records going back to 1961. It is possible that there are many more reports of lightning deaths and injuries that never made it into the databases the National Weather Service maintains. One fact many people may not know is that Montana averages about 600,000 cloud-to-ground flashes a year, and is ranked 3rd in the nation for deaths if you weigh it to include population.

The activities that were occurring when people were struck in Montana include golfing, farming/ranching, being on a lake or river, riding in an open vehicle, maintaining roads, riding a horse and bow hunting. We've already had multiple deaths and injuries in Montana this year due to lightning. Ages of the victims in Montana have ranged from teens to a 102-year-old man. Many people who receive indirect hits do not seek medical attention, but they could still suffer minor injuries from the strike.

In Montana, lightning tends to be the most intense from mid-May through September. It's not unheard of to have lightning reported in every month of the year though. On some warm winter days "thundersnow" can occur, when a snowstorm contains lightning. Most of the flashes in the western portion of the state are from noon to 9 pm, while the eastern portion of the state is from 4 pm to 2 am.

The best thing you can do is go indoors if you hear thunder, or see lightning approaching your area. It is best to be aware of changing weather conditions if thunderstorms are in the forecast; don't be the one struck by the first bolt of lightning. If you are hiking, get out of the open, but do not stand under the only tree in an area! A grove of trees would be better. If you are near your vehicle, such as at a ballpark, swimming pool, or amphitheater, go to your vehicle, and wait for the storm to pass by. *A dugout or pool locker room are not safe facilities to be in during an electrical storm.* They have many openings to the outdoors and lots of metal in the area.

When farming, a tractor with a full metal cab and windows around it should be safe, but if you are in an open cab, seeking shelter in a vehicle or sturdy building is the safest thing you can do. If you are recreating on a lake, make sure to head back to the boat ramps as soon as you see storms in the distance. Ramps will get busy and there may be a wait to load your boat up.

For more information on lightning safety, visit the Lightning Safety Awareness Week website at <http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov>