

Lightning Storm — Monsoon in Desolation

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In the late summer of 1983 Betsy and I backpacked into to the Desolation Wilderness from Echo Lake. Back then it was a quiet time with few other campers after the kids were in school. It was lovely as only the Sierras can be. Bare granite , peaks, and clear mountain lakes are my favorite places. After three days we had looped around to the Lake of the Woods and set up camp on the northwest side of the lake near a boulder field. We set up my North Face pyramid type tent and spent a lazy afternoon poking around the lake and testing the comfort of various rocks for napping. Spotty clouds started to develop in the afternoon, not uncommon, but soon started to build more ominously.

After dinner we enjoyed a lovely sunset with dramatic clouds still growing and then retired to our tent. About 10 we were awakened by the not too distant crack of thunder and a flash of lightning. We poked our heads out to see what was going on and saw streaks of lightning to the south—headed our way.

Suddenly a gust of wind slammed the tent and it started to pour with monsoonal force. We zipped up the tent and hunkered down. In about 10 minutes the lightning grew closer and we began to count seconds from flash to thunder. One thousand one, one thousand two— 5 seconds means a mile away. Every 20-30 seconds there was another boom of thunder and flash showing through the tent fabric. Five miles, three miles, one mile....

Soon it was just one or two seconds as the electrical storm intensified. Lightning strikes hit every few seconds all around the lake basin. Looking out we saw a tree blasted to bits and smoking. The rain and lightning became so intense we decided to leave the tent and its metal poles behind. We put on our rain gear and crouched low as we moved lower down and squatted near a boulder pile. The show was fantastic and terrifying at the same time. We had never seen anything like it—and hope to never see again. After twenty minutes we were soaked and cold but the storm had not moderated. We crouched low as we ran back to the tent, shed our wet clothes and lay still awaiting the worst.

It was incredible to feel the intensity Nature could bring to a late summer night. After more than an hour the rain eased a bit and the lighting slowly moved off to the north. We were amazed to be alive. and so freaked it took a long time to fall asleep.

But the monsoon was not done with us yet. The next day we were headed out under a blue sky, but with clouds growing to the south. As we passed Tamarack Lake were were stunned by a lightning bolt that struck about 15 feet from us just a foot or two from the trail. We both got a buzz and jolt as fragments of blasted granite blew past us. The flash and the bang left us stunned. Our retinas were seared and our ears ringing. After ensuring we were both ok we pulled our packs tight against our backs and started running. After the adrenaline wore off we started just walking fast, eager to reach Echo Lake and our car. Grateful to be alive.

It was the first strike of the day and miles in front of the leading clouds. We were down low on a bench above the lake in a place we would have thought was safe based on what we knew at the time. Looking around we saw a tall pine tree upwind and thought perhaps it had enabled the charge to connect for the bolt. Research since then has shown that these relatively rare “bolts from the blue” can reach up to 50 miles from the edge of the storm clouds and the old rules of thumb for safety were flawed.

