

# Tired of The Weather? Talk To The Jet Stream

By Donald J. Frederick  
National Geographic News Service

WASHINGTON—Hero or villain? Jet streams can play either role, depending on where you are and what kind of weather you prefer.

The invisible ribbons of wind that course through space get applause for bringing relief from sweltering heat or bitter cold, hisses for helping spawn spring tornadoes or raging winter blizzards. Air line passengers sometimes feel their wrath in a bumpy ride, their blessing in an early arrival.

Jet streams are components of the global wind system which labors endlessly to send excess heat from the equator toward the poles and cold polar air back down toward the tropics.

## Air Belts Converge

Most of the air does not flow a nonstop route. Warm air traveling toward the poles goes only about a third of the way; then it cools, sinks, and travels back toward the tropics, where it's known as the trade winds. Similarly, most of the polar air moving toward the equator grows warmer a third of the way down and begins to rise and flow back toward the poles.

The differences in temperature between these two belts of air cause a third one to form over the Earth's mid-latitudes. The planet's rotation, reaching speeds of about 1,100 mph at the equator, makes this wind blow toward the east.

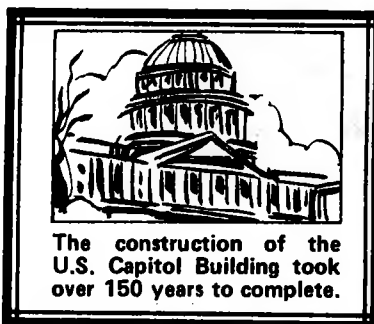
Sweeping the United States and Canada from west to east coast, the winds are known as the westerlies, and their high speed cores of air are the jet streams.

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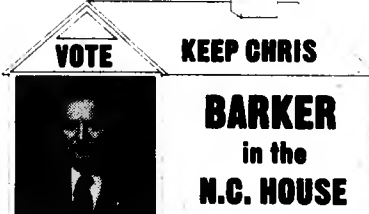
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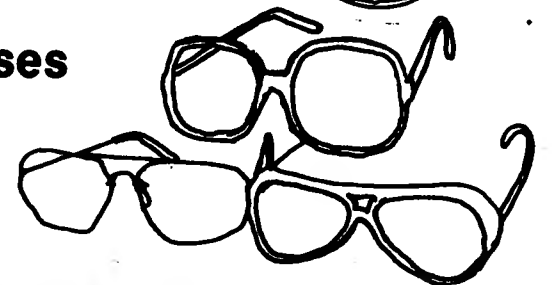
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