

# Mamma clouds are not what I imagined



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAM ASHETON

Mamma clouds over the ridgeline.



**Pam Asheton**  
Listening to the Land

It was frosty and sharp clear early one recent Sunday morning, then T-shirt warm riding the pinto Apache horse by late morning before going on to a brief ear-splitting thunderstorm of the deepest ominous grays overhead. That was followed by hours of heat and cloudless sunshine before the oddest of cloud formed over the eastern ridgeline brooding over

its learning curves. I would love to remember all those 27 or so basic cloud classification symbols and their 'shorthand' squiggles denoting low, medium and high altitudes to the international audience of aviators, meteorologists (and para-and-local hang-gliders) but something happens to the short-term memory – that, and that mind-twisting Latin terminology.

So, photographs worldwide of those 27 classifications and then other fascinating images planet-wide, for me, really work. By wonderful synchronicity (can you believe it), page 114 opened up to exactly that eastern ridgeline's weird formations, called a 'mamma' – or mammatus.

These, remarks the nicely succinct text, are udder-like protuberances that can form on the under surfaces

Horse Creek's valley.

My long-time friend Caroline Stanley gifted me the photograph rich 'The Cloud Book, How to Understand the Skies' by Richard Hamblin (in association with the British Met Office). Bless her for knowing how my mind works on

of stratocumulus or cumulonimbus cloud (particularly the latter). Here the science starts to come into shape, 'caused by powerful downdrafts when pockets of cold, moist (it certainly was that!) air sink rapidly from the upper to the lower parts of cloud, reversing the usual upward convection of warm, humid air.'

Well, of course, the fact that I spend an inordinate amount of time outside and not know a 'mamma' cloud is quite poor, really. Their shapes, the author continues, can vary considerably from 'near spherical like pouches to tubular rippled or merely undulating globules, sometimes, he concludes helpfully, arranged in cellular formation.

'Incus' (in the supplementary clouds section) get a useful mention, useful in that the unique anvil summits, so often highlighted by gloriously deeply blue skies, are next up in June and July Alberta weather forecastings as well as spectacular towering Cumulonimbus capillatus that so often have the sweeps of heavy rainfall back-

lit, again, by hard sunshine.

And, the sort of weird almost Martian flying saucer 'UFO' clouds known as Altopcumulus lenticularis so distinct indeed to our local Alberta foothills, enchant the book's author, too, who exclaims these 'beautiful undulating clouds often emerge and dissipate in unexpected ways, even unusually 'plates stacking up' in a formation from the French description, a *pile d'assiettes* (most weather descriptions heavily lean towards Latin and Greek origins).

And, what Shakespeare had in mind of lenticularis, writing in (Act 3, Scene ii) remembering perhaps sky-watching as so many world-class poets and writers dream, imagine, watching as the shape of a camel slides instead perhaps into a weasel, 'Or like a whale'... then 'very like a whale', Polonius triumphantly finishes to Hamlet.

Addictive things to humans, clouds—nature's gift to share such beauty with us, and inform us, too, of what the weather's aiming towards!

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