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The World's Weirdest Natural Disasters

By Marcia Amidon Lusted

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Natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes, happen all over the world and cause huge amounts of damage. In this article, Marcia Amidon Lusted tells about rare and surprising natural disasters from history. As you read, take notes on why these natural disasters are "weird."

- [1] In West Africa, a lake spits out a cloud and, hours later, over a thousand people are dead. A fireball lands in Russia, with the force of 185 atomic bombs. And a volcanic explosion in one part of the world creates a year's worth of terrible weather around the globe. Weird, right? Most of us think of natural disasters as things like hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods. But these aren't the only kinds of disasters that people have had to deal with in the past. And while any kind of natural disaster can cause destruction, injuries, and deaths, history tells us there is a collection of natural disasters that can only be classified¹ as "weird."



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Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death

Imagine an entire year with temperatures so low that few crops can grow, and there is snow or frost every single month. Well that happened! The year was 1815, and in North America it became known as "the year without a summer," or the year "Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death." Rivers and lakes were covered with ice in July and August. Eighteen inches of snow fell in New England in July. Birds froze to death and fell out of the sky. There were food shortages.² People couldn't find enough firewood to heat their homes.

What could have caused such terrible weather? It was something that happened on the other side of the world, on the island of Sumbawa in Indonesia. On April 10, 1815, Mount Tambora exploded in the biggest volcanic eruption that the world has ever seen. It spewed ash, stone, and volcanic rock — enough to cover a 200-square-mile area, twelve feet deep! It killed 12,000 people. But the effects of the Tambora explosion went far beyond Indonesia. A huge amount of ash, dust, and various gasses were sent 10 miles into the air. It created a cloud so dense that it reflected sunlight away from the earth and cooled its atmosphere³ by a half degree. Temperatures fell all over the world, and people in Europe, North America, and Asia were starved. It took three years for the

1. to group or order in classes
2. an amount that is less than is needed
3. **Atmosphere** (*noun*) the gasses surrounding the Earth or other similar objects in outer space

effects of the 1815 volcano to completely disappear and for temperatures to return to normal.

The Tunguska Event

It was June in the year 1908, just past 7 a.m., and a man was sitting on his porch in Vanavara, Siberia, a remote⁴ area in Russia. Suddenly, he was thrown from his chair, and a wave of heat rolled over him, hot enough that he thought his shirt was on fire. There was a deafening⁵ bang, and a fiery ball streaked across the sky. Forty miles from where the man had been sitting, an asteroid had entered earth's atmosphere at a speed of 33,500 miles per hour. It became so hot that it exploded 28,000 feet above the earth in a remote place called Tunguska.

- [5] The explosion, which scientist call a meteor air burst, was as powerful as 185 atomic bombs and ripped apart eight hundred square miles of forest. Eighty million trees were instantly flattened in a circular pattern. People and animals close to the site were either injured or died. Even one hundred miles away from the impact, windows shattered in houses. Sensors as far away as England recorded the shockwaves. Scientists believe it is the largest asteroid to hit earth in modern times.

The Lake Nyos Disaster in Cameroon

Lake Nyos was a serene,⁶ blue lake in the West African country of Cameroon. The people who lived near the lake were farmers who raised cattle and grew food for their families. But on the peaceful evening of August 21, 1986, Lake Nyos became deadly. Farmers living nearby heard a rumbling sound, and suddenly a frothy plume⁷ of spray shot out of the water hundreds of feet into the air. A white cloud formed above the lake and began drifting across the water and onto the land.

Curious farmers came out of their homes to see what had happened. Many of them immediately fell unconscious.⁸ The cloud continued drifting, and soon covered a deep valley. The people there, those both inside and outside their homes, instantly collapsed and died. Cattle also died in the fields. It continued like this, as the cloud kept moving, people and animals, as far as fifteen miles away from the lake, collapsed and died. On August 23, the cloud finally lifted. It left behind only a few survivors, people who would wake at various times to find themselves surrounded by dead bodies. A total of 1,800 people were killed.

Why was the Lake Nyos cloud so deadly? Scientists discovered that it was made of carbon dioxide (CO₂) mixed with air. When there is too much CO₂, it replaces the oxygen in the body's cells. This causes suffocation,⁹ unconsciousness, and can lead to death. As the cloud kept moving, the amount of CO₂ increased, killing people instantly. Researchers finally found a layer of CO₂ on the bottom of the lake, but they have been unable to discover where it came from. A bubble of this CO₂ was released when a rockslide took place on the shore. This forced the lake to burp up the CO₂, which sprayed into the air and created the deadly cloud. Today Lake Nyos is

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4. **Remote** (*adjective*) far from towns or areas where people live
 5. **Deafening** (*verb*) to be filled with noise
 6. free from trouble; calm
 7. **Plume** (*noun*) something that looks feathery
 8. **Unconscious** (*adjective*) not aware or awake
 9. to kill from not allowing to breathe

no longer blue. It is now shallower and has turned a rusty color because of dark brown water that came up from the lake's bottom with the spray. Scientists have installed huge plastic pipes in the lake that constantly bring water from the bottom to the surface. This lets the CO₂ slowly bubble out and dissolve,¹⁰ so it won't burp out again and cause another tragedy in the future.

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10. **Dissolve** (*verb*) to melt