

# PREVENTING THE SUMMERTIME BLUES

**H**umidity is the most vital consideration in the life and well-being of your guitar. Fortunately, there are measures you can take to prevent extreme relative humidity (RH) factors from adversely affecting your instrument. It is important to take precautions that are appropriate for your region, because "summer" means different things in different parts of the country.

## Low Humidity

No environmental condition can do more damage to your instrument than low relative humidity (RH). In most areas of the US, low RH levels accompany the onslaught of winter, mostly due to the effects of artificially heating our homes and buildings. However, many areas experience naturally low humidity all year long. The entire Rocky Mountain region, for example, has notoriously low RH levels, as do Phoenix, Reno, Las Vegas, Tucson, and a number of other cities.

Whether seasonal or continuous, the existence of low RH levels necessitates extra measures to protect your guitar from damage, to keep it in peak playing condition, and to ensure its long, healthy life. The use of a sound-hole humidifier is crucial to keeping your guitar properly humidified during low RH spells. Drier areas of the country require *year-around* use of a sound-hole humidifier. [See "Using a Guitar Humidifier," Spring '96 *Wood&Steel*, and "Symptoms of a Dry Guitar," Fall '94 *Wood&Steel* – both tech-sheets available through our customer service department.]



## High Humidity

In the past, we haven't discussed high humidity very much because, generally, it is not as damaging as low humidity, and incidences of high-RH problems are relatively low. If sustained for long periods, however, high humidity levels can cause damage to your solid-wood guitar. The likelihood of this being a problem is greater in some areas of the country than in others.

If you split the USA down the middle, the half extending from the Midwest to the eastern seaboard — notable for extremely cold winters — tends to have consistently high RH levels during the summer. [Note: **Guitar owners in those regions should put away their soundhole humidifiers until the winter chill encourages the use of artificial heaters, which will drive those levels down again.**] Summer in the southeastern region of the country brings especially high RH levels, and such states as Florida,

Alabama, and Louisiana are *extremely* humid. Owners of solid-wood acoustic guitars in these locales should exercise prudence.

While the western half of the US map is a mostly low-RH zone, visitors stepping off the plane in Hawaii will immediately notice the customary high humidity, and should be prepared to protect their acoustic guitars.

Although it's fairly easy to maintain your guitar through temporary spells of moderately high humidity, RH levels that remain above 65 percent for extended periods can cause the top of a guitar to swell, resulting in high action, and the excess moisture also will dull those crisp tonal qualities we all love. In turn, serious damage from more prolonged, untreated swelling can include the separation of the body binding along the top and/or back of the guitar, and at various glue joints. Noticeable warping of the top and back around the tailblock area is a key warning sign.



1980 GILLESPIE WAY • EL CAJON, CA 92020-1096 • CUSTOMER SERVICE (619) 258-6957 • FAX (619) 258-3797

### De-humidifying Your Guitar and Case

Silica gel is an effective desiccant, and sugar-packet-size silica gel packs are used to reduce moisture levels in small, confined areas, such as food containers and cases containing photographic equipment and musical instruments. In high-RH conditions, it is advisable to leave several of these packets in your guitar case. To ensure that they don't exceed their moisture-holding capacity and become ineffective, it is wise to replace them every few months during prolonged periods of high humidity. **An old-time method is to put some in an old sock.**

Your Taylor guitar case is made of wood (laminated poplar), so it can absorb, retain, and radiate moisture in high RH situations, thus affecting the guitar itself. To counteract that, we recommend removing the guitar and blow-drying the inside of your case for 15 minutes or so (medium heat, from several inches away), every few weeks. The warm air will evaporate and dissipate excess moisture in the case, thus preventing it from accumulating in the guitar.

### De-humidifying Your Home

There are a number of ways to keep the RH levels in large spaces below the danger zone for guitars. Air conditioners effectively reduce RH levels as a by-product of cooling the air. As air passes over the cold coils, the moisture in that air condenses and drips down a drain or into a collector. Some people who live in areas where very high humidity is a constant have

central air conditioning, which essentially is a big de-humidifier. If the RH level outdoors is in the 85-percent range, central air conditioning will keep the indoor RH level at about 60 percent, a more acceptable level for guitars.

Small, portable de-humidifiers are available for use in smaller spaces, such as dedicated "music rooms" (Sears has them). Again, these are, in effect, air conditioners. A compressor runs freon through a coil, a fan blows air past the coil, and the resulting condensation collects in a pan (thankfully, most of these portables automatically turn off when the pan is full).

Whether using central or portable air conditioning/de-humidifying equipment, it is a good idea to use a hygrometer to monitor humidity levels.

### Swamp Coolers

Whereas air conditioners de-humidify a space, "swamp coolers" produce the opposite effect. In the summer, many of those who live in areas of very dry heat use swamp coolers to force moist air into a room, thus simultaneously cooling and humidifying it.

If you use a swamp cooler in your home, or in a room where you keep your guitar(s), be sure to purchase a hygrometer to keep track of RH levels. *And be careful: If you use a Dampit in conjunction with a swamp cooler, you run the risk of over-humidifying your instrument.*

### Things to Avoid

The combination of high heat and high relative humidity is a potentially deadly one-two punch to your guitar. At all costs, avoid leaving your guitar in the trunk of a car during these conditions, or in any other similar situations. Carelessness in this regard can result in the destruction of the guitar's finish.

When touring in humid areas, consider leaving your guitar out of its case for 30 minutes to one hour before going onstage. This will enable the instrument to acclimate to the high RH, which will maintain tuning stability during the performance. However, it is not good to leave the guitar exposed to these conditions longer than necessary. In addition to tuning problems, adverse reactions to high heat and high RH can require neck adjustments and other setup work that is easily avoided with a little forethought.

Remember, this information is provided as a general guide. We don't mean to scare anyone, or to cause undue concern. Not all of this humidity stuff is pertinent to everyone's situation, so there's no need to feel overwhelmed by it. The important thing is to enjoy playing your guitar, and to use common sense in caring for it. You *know* when it's very humid, or very dry, or when you turn on an air conditioning unit, a swamp cooler, or, for that matter, a heater. At those times, simply be mindful of how RH factors can affect your instrument, keep it in its case as much as possible, and refer to this information so that you can take sensible steps to protect it.

**By Terry Myers**

