

Hurricane season defied predictions

by *The-Oxford-Press*

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — The 2006 hurricane season began amid months of warnings that calamity was just around the corner.

Two years of hurricanes such as Charley, Frances, Jeanne and Wilma had left Floridians with torn homes, blue roofs, skyrocketing insurance costs and a sense of here-we-go-again as the dreaded date of June 1 rolled around. Katrina had proven, once more, that killer storms won't spare famous American cities. And according to all the experts, the season was set for yet another spin in the tropical Cuisinart.

Instead, we got lucky.

The season turned out to be the Atlantic's quietest since 1997, producing two-thirds fewer storms than last year's record-shattering 28.

No hurricanes at all struck the U.S. coast, which felt only a trio of tropical storms. South Florida's only slap came from a fizzling underachiever named Ernesto.

The season officially ends today, but no Atlantic storm has reared its whirling head since Oct. 2, when the remnants of Hurricane Isaac gasped their last breaths east of Newfoundland.

You can thank the unexpected return of El Niño for strangling potential storms in their cribs, meteorologists say. Meanwhile, some unusual wind patterns kept the season's strongest hurricanes — including two Category 3 storms — spinning far from land in the mid-Atlantic.

Savor your good fortune, experts advise. Just don't count on a repeat next year.

The Atlantic remains locked in its post-1995 cycle of warm ocean waters and active hurricane seasons, and will probably remain there for decades, most meteorologists believe. Years like 2006 will be an exception — a pause in which to finish those repairs and buy more storm supplies.

"People need to prepare," said Gerry Bell, the lead hurricane season forecaster for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "We see time and time again that people who have prepared fare much better than those who have not."

Of course, NOAA and other agencies didn't fare so well in forecasting the season.

Bell's agency predicted as many as 16 tropical storms in its May forecast — including eight to 10 hurricanes — and as recently as August called for a 75 percent chance of an "above normal" season. One of the nation's most-quoted hurricane soothsayers, Colorado State University researcher William Gray, had predicted 17 storms, along with a 64 percent likelihood of a major hurricane hitting the U.S. East Coast.

Even more alarming scenarios came from The History Channel and The Weather Channel, which aired prime-time specials on the possibility of a catastrophic hurricane hitting New York City.

In March, the Pennsylvania-based company AccuWeather warned that the entire Northeast was "staring down the barrel of a gun," overdue for a hurricane that could strike "perhaps as early as this season." Several newspapers published reports that low-lying Tampa Bay, long untouched by hurricanes, could become "the next New Orleans."

Those disasters still might happen, but not this year.

Instead, the Atlantic spawned nine storms, the lowest since 1997's total of eight. Only five of this year's storms became hurricanes, the least since four formed in 2002.

The hurricane center will probably classify the season as "normal," senior specialist Richard Pasch said. "Normal looks really quiet compared to '04 and '05."

What went wrong — or went right, as coastal residents might ask? Mainly, meteorologists say they didn't expect El Niño to roar back.

El Niño, a global climate pattern signaled by warm water in the eastern Pacific, creates hostile winds that shred hurricanes in the Atlantic and Caribbean. As recently as March, federal meteorologists had predicted a continuation of its opposite pattern, La Niña, which favors Atlantic hurricanes.

But by May, the cycle started to reverse. By September, the federal Climate Prediction Center was noting a dramatic rise in ocean temperatures off Peru.

Besides the hostile winds, Bell said El Niño contributed to a pattern of stable, sinking air that helped stifle potential storms over the Caribbean and western Atlantic.

The season also saw strong winds pushing eastward in the upper atmosphere over the U.S. East Coast, which

helped keep Hurricanes Florence through Isaac offshore. That was a contrast to 2004 and 2005, when storms kept plowing west across Florida.

Meteorologists are still debating other causes for this year's doldrums. Some suggest that huge bursts of dry, dust-laden Saharan air calmed the atmosphere over the Atlantic, but others noted that dust storms also appeared in 2005.

Bad news: Nobody knows how long El Niño will stay.

NOAA said Monday that El Niño will likely persist through spring, and possibly into August. But several forecasting models call for a return to "neutral" conditions "similar to those of 2005" by April, the Australian Bureau of Meteorology says.

Bell noted that since 1995, when the Atlantic's active cycle began, only three years have produced below-average numbers of hurricanes: 1997, 2002 and this year. Each featured an El Niño.

"Pretend we're in 2002," he said. "Ask the same questions: What will happen in 2003, 2004, 2005? ... It's far too early to make any inferences."

By ROBERT P. KINGCox News Service

Robert P. King writes for The Palm Beach Post.

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