

Hurricanes in Florida

Florida has quite a history with hurricanes. Because it is near the tropics and westerly winds blow off the African coasts along the equator, Florida is vulnerable.

What does the word hurricane mean?

The word hurricane probably comes to us by way of the Spanish explorers. They picked up the term from the Taino Indian word huracan (evil spirit). The word probably came to the Taino from the Maya word Huraken (God of Storms or bad weather).

What are hurricanes?

Hurricanes are severe tropical storms that form over warm ocean waters—usually starting as storms in the Caribbean or off the west coast of Africa. As the storms drift slowly westward, they gather heat and energy through contact with warm ocean waters. Evaporation from the seawater increases their power.

Warm, moist air moves toward the center of the storm and spirals upward. This is similar to the “dust devils” that form on a hot afternoon along a sandy beach. Hurricanes rotate in a counter-clockwise direction around an “eye.” The most violent part of a hurricane is at the edges of its eye, called the eye wall.

Hurricanes are defined as having winds of at least 74 miles per hour. Hurricanes strengthen until they come into contact with land or cooler water. When they come onto land, the heavy rain, strong winds, and heavy waves can damage buildings, trees, and cars. The heavy waves are called a storm surge.

Can hurricanes be predicted?

Although the Army Signal Corps had been attempting to issue storm warnings as far back as 1873, there was no official tracking of hurricanes in the United States until 1890. Following a bad storm in 1899, a more comprehensive system was established. Today, the National Hurricane Center is

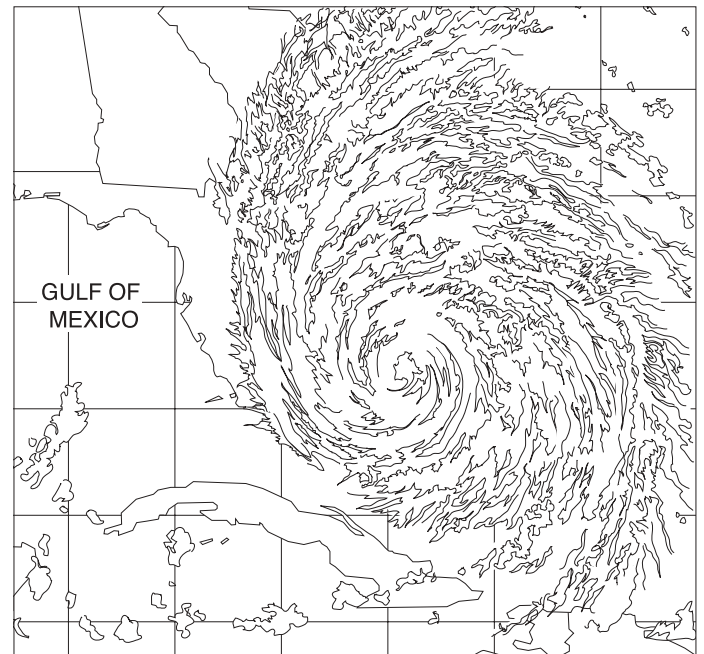
located in Miami. Experts there are particularly busy during the Atlantic hurricane season from June 1 through November 30. Specially strengthened and electronically equipped aircraft are sent into the eye of a hurricane to help in the analysis of a hurricane’s strength.

If a hurricane is possible within 36 hours, the Hurricane Center issues a Hurricane Watch. This means they are tracking the storm and trying to predict where it may come ashore. People in the area should stay tuned to the radio and television for more information.

If a hurricane is expected within 24 hours, the Hurricane Center issues a Hurricane Warning. This means that people may be told to evacuate. People in the area should begin making preparation to leave.

How are hurricanes named?

Since 1953, Atlantic tropical storms have been named from lists produced by the National Hurricane



Center. The Atlantic is assigned six lists of names, with one list used each year. Each name on the list starts with a different letter. The first hurricane of the season starts with the letter “A,” followed by “B,” and so forth alphabetically. When an unusually destructive hurricane hits, that hurricane’s name is never used again.

How are hurricanes classified?

Hurricanes are classified into five categories, based on their wind speeds and potential to cause damage.

- Category 1: Winds 74-95 miles per hour
- Category 2: Winds 96-110 miles per hour
- Category 3: Winds 111-130 miles per hour
- Category 4: Winds 131-155 miles per hour
- Category 5: Winds greater than 155 miles per hour

What are some of Florida’s worst hurricanes?

1906

The worst hurricane in 170 years killed one hundred railroad workers in the Keys. The eye passed over Miami. At least 34 people were killed when it reached the Pensacola area.

1909, 1910, 1919

A series of bad hurricanes hit the Keys. They damaged the Seven Mile Bridge and caused major damage in Key West.

1921

The last major hurricane to hit Tampa and the Florida central west coast caused over a million dollars in damage. The storm passed across the state and exited at Jacksonville.

1926

The eye passed over Miami. Wind gusts were estimated at 150 miles per hour. Most buildings in Dade and Broward Counties were damaged or destroyed. There was major flooding of all coastal sections, downtown Miami, and downtown Ft. Lauderdale.

(1928) Okeechobee Hurricane

The eye of the hurricane moved ashore near Palm Beach causing widespread destruction. Nearly 2,000 people died when the dikes broke on Lake Okeechobee, causing massive flooding.

(1935) Florida Keys Labor Day Hurricane

This was the strongest storm ever to hit the United States. The winds were estimated up to 250 miles per hour. This small but intense storm (category 5) caused significant damage. Hundreds of World War I veterans who had been sent to the Keys to help build the U.S. Highway One were killed. The storm surge floated an entire train away.

(1960) Hurricane Donna

This hurricane had 150 mile per hour winds. It caused major damage in the Keys.

(1992) Hurricane Andrew

This hurricane hit Miami. It was the most costly natural disaster to hit a United States city in modern times. It caused \$30 billion in damage.

