

HURRICANES

The Greatest Storms on Earth

What is a Hurricane?

A hurricane is a type of tropical cyclone, which is a generic term for a low-pressure system that generally forms in the tropics. The cyclone is accompanied by thunderstorms and, in the Northern Hemisphere, a counterclockwise circulation of winds near the earth's surface. Tropical cyclones are classified as follows:

Tropical Depression

An organized system of clouds and thunderstorms with a defined surface circulation and maximum sustained winds (defined as a 1-minute average wind measured at about 33 ft above the surface) of 38 mph or less

Tropical Storm

An organized system of strong thunderstorms with a defined surface circulation and maximum sustained winds of 39-73 mph

Hurricane

An intense tropical weather system of strong thunderstorms with a well-defined surface circulation and maximum sustained winds of 74 mph or higher. Hurricanes are categorized according to the strength of their winds using the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale (see <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutsshws.php> for more information). A Category 1 storm has

the lowest wind speeds, while a Category 5 hurricane has the strongest. These are relative terms, because lower category storms can sometimes inflict greater damage than higher category storms, depending on where they strike and the particular hazards they bring. In fact, tropical storms can also produce significant damage and loss of life, mainly due to flooding.

Hurricane Categories

Category 1	Winds 74-95 mph
Category 2	Winds 96-110 mph
Category 3	Winds 111-130 mph
Category 4	Winds 131-155 mph
Category 5	Winds 156 or greater

Each year, an average of ten tropical storms develop over the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea, and Gulf of Mexico. Many of these remain over the ocean and never impact the U.S. coastline. Six of these storms become hurricanes each year. In an average 3-year period, roughly five hurricanes strike the US coastline, killing approximately 50 to 100 people anywhere from Texas to Maine. Of these, two are typically "major" or "intense" hurricanes (a category 3 or higher storm on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale).