

Living with Hurricanes

By Benjamin Wunderly

As dependable as the tide, hurricane season happens every year, threatening the way of life for many people. The typical window that a tropical cyclone may form in the Atlantic basin starts June 1 and ends November 30. "Hurricane Alley," the prime area that produces tropical storms and hurricanes, refers to a swath of warm ocean water that stretches from the west coast of northern Africa to the Caribbean, into the Gulf of Mexico and north to the southeastern coast of the United States. The general movement of such storms is from east to west, making North Carolina a prime target for landfall and any ensuing devastation. Staggering rainfall, winds in excess of 100 miles per hour and storm surges measured in feet, all occurring over extended periods of time of a day or more, take a toll on anything in their path.

We are fortunate to live in an era when forecasting and prediction of such powerful storms gives us the advantage to prepare early and make plans for evacuation if necessary. However, even with these technological advances people can still fall victim to the strongest and biggest storms on Earth, as witnessed with hurricanes Sandy and Katrina. Stories from early coastal residents and inhabitants are even more harrowing and can frighten even the bravest soul. With no warning and not knowing when the storm might pass, hurricanes would wreak havoc physically and mentally. All any person, and animal for that matter, could do was seek shelter and wait out Mother Nature. Some of these accounts have been documented and along with other records tell a dreary tale of North Carolina's hurricane history.

The number of hurricanes and tropical storms to have hit North Carolina over the years is unknown, with some earlier accounts by Europeans being somewhat subjective and assuming. In 1586, on a return voyage to England after a raid on the Spanish fort of San Augustín, Sir Francis Drake encountered a storm off Roanoke Island that lasted three days from June 23-26 and put his fleet in danger. On September 16, 1713 it is possible that a violent hurricane brushed the coast near Charleston, South Carolina before hitting the Cape Fear region where ships were driven far inland, including a sloop found three miles over the marsh in the woods.

By piecing together historical accounts and meteorological records it can be estimated that the number of storms making landfall or passing through North Carolina totals over 400 in the past 427 years. That is practically one storm every year. If that one storm is a category four or five on the Saffir-Simpson scale we would see major devastation to the coast as we know it. In the late 1800s it was a series of storms followed by the "big" one that caused residents of Shackleford Banks to leave the island and seek more protected places to live. In 1893 there were five hurricanes that affected North Carolina, followed with two in 1894, three in 1897, another in 1898 and two more in 1899. The people of Diamond City, Wades Hammock, Winsor's and Guthrie's Lump had had enough. They packed up their belongings and in some cases dismantled what was left of their homes, loaded it all up on boats and left to Harkers Island and other places such as Marshallberg, Morehead City and the maritime forest of Salter Path.

Over 500 people may have lived on Shackleford Banks at the end of the 19th century, today the only remaining residents are the wild horses that survive on their own. For the people of Hatteras Island the threat of storm surge breaching the dunes can not only devastate human structures but the island itself. When Hurricane Isabel hit on September 18, 2003 it created an inlet just south of Frisco village over 600 yards wide, cutting off any highway access to Hatteras village. The aftermath of Hurricane Irene is still being dealt with almost two years after the storm hit on August 27, 2011. A temporary bridge over an inlet created by Irene and the ferry from Ocracoke are the only means of access to all of the Hatteras Island communities. Breaking through a barrier island is no problem for strong storms and it has been happening for many years. Originally known as The Inlet of 1849, Oregon Inlet opened during a hurricane in 1846 (a transcribing error accounts for the wrong year). Hatteras Inlet was formed during the same storm.



New inlets cut by Hurricane Irene. (Department of the Interior/USGS U.S. Geological Survey)

