

What is a hurricane?

Hurricanes are large weather systems with strong winds rotating around a calm center, the eye. Most hurricanes that affect the continental United States form in tropical waters near the equator. Although people flock to warm places like the Caribbean for their balmy breezes and sultry seas, they should remember these conditions also make them “hurricane breeding grounds,” particularly from June through October.

A hurricane starts as a tropical storm that gains heat energy and moisture as it drifts northward over the warm waters, such as those of the Caribbean Sea or the Gulf Stream. When its sustained winds reach 74 mph, the storm is classified as a hurricane. A hurricane is fed by warm ocean waters, so once it starts to cross land, deprived of heat and energy and dragged apart by friction, the storm dissipates. But often not until it has caused massive destruction to people and property.

Saffir-Simpson Scale

The Saffir-Simpson Scale was devised to communicate the severity of a hurricane using the following criteria:

| Type | Category | Damage | Pressure (mmHg) | Winds (mph) | Storm Surge (feet) |
|----------------|----------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Depression | - | - | - | >35 | - |
| Tropical Storm | - | - | >28.94 | 39-73 | - |
| Hurricane | 1 | minimal | 28.50-28.91 | 74-95 | 4-5 |
| Hurricane | 2 | moderate | 27.91-28.47 | 96-110 | 6-8 |
| Hurricane | 3 | extensive | 27.91-27.88 | 111-130 | 9-12 |
| Hurricane | 4 | extreme | 27.17-27.88 | 131-155 | 13-18 |
| Hurricane | 5 | catastrophic | <27.17 | >155 | >18 |