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## Dodging a Bullet

**N**ovember 30 officially marked the end of the 2006 hurricane season. In comparison to the two seasons before — 2004, the year of Charley, Frances, Jeanne, and Ivan; and 2005, the unforgettable year of Katrina, Rita, and Wilma — it was downright calm. But to the National Hurricane Center, it was “near normal.” A normal season, as defined by the National Hurricane Center, has six to 14 named storms, with four to eight of those reaching hurricane strength, and one to three “major” hurricanes reaching Category 3 or higher.

This past season there were, in fact, nine named storms, five of which reached hurricane status. But only one — Hurricane Helene — reached Category 3, and all weakened below hurricane status before making landfall.

Thankfully. Coastal residents, particularly those along the ravaged Gulf Coast, where life is still far from normal, can all draw a collective sigh of relief for having dodged a bullet this year. It provides much-needed time for those rebuilding after Katrina to continue their efforts. We need that time to continue assessing what went wrong in 2005.

There are two primary conclusions to be drawn from the apparent lull of 2006. The first is that it's decidedly unwise to draw any conclusion about long-term weather patterns based on the outcome of one storm season. Hurricane researchers still insist we are in a cycle of high storm activity. This past year, just as many low-pressure systems formed, and water temperatures in the Atlantic remained high enough to kindle plenty of storm activity. However, strong winds blowing from the Pacific created enough shear to disperse high-level clouds and prevent the storms from building to any size. That points to the likelihood that we can expect more action next season. If anything, the statistical ante has just been raised.

There is another thing to bear in mind: If you were working in Nantucket in July when tropical storm Beryl grazed the island, or near Long Beach, N.C., at the end of August when Ernesto blew ashore, or on the south coast of Newfoundland when the tail end of Florence inundated homes with driving wind and rain, the 2006 season was still intense (likely even more so than the year before). That's especially true for the couple killed in Gloucester, Va., when Ernesto blew over a tree that crushed their house, or the family in François, Newfoundland, whose home was blown into the surf by Florence.

Too often the generalizations of science are misreported or misunderstood. Hurricanes, like house building, are local events, and life on the coast will always have to contend with gale-force winds, lashing rains, short wetting and drying cycles, elevated humidity, salt spray, and a risk of flooding, all of which present a threat to homes. Best we prepare for it. — *Clayton DeKorne*



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