

# Virginia has seen more tornadoes in April than any other month

By JOHN BOYER – Richmond Times–Dispatch

Apr 4, 2019

Tornadoes can strike Virginia in any month of the year, but there's something ominous about April in particular. We've experienced many of our worst tornado outbreaks in this early-to-middle part of spring.

An outbreak is a group of tornadoes organized by the same weather system. Tornadoes in outbreaks are often more violent, long-lived, and widespread than ones made by a lone thunderstorm. That heightens the risk for damage and loss of life.

April can bring about a potent combination of tornado outbreak ingredients in our region: air that's finally warm and humid enough to fuel violent thunderstorms, and strong winds aloft that can shape those storms into rotating supercells.

Because of that, Virginia has seen more tornadoes in April than any other month of the year.

Summer tornadoes are common, but they're usually more isolated events.

By the time we get to late summer and early fall, we see more large outbreaks spawned by hurricanes and tropical storms. Though tropical tornadoes are usually smaller and weaker than their springtime counterparts, they are still dangerous.

Here's a list of the outbreaks that produced ten or more tornadoes in Virginia.

Together, these events account for nearly 20 percent of all the state's tornado reports since 1950, but 30 percent of the tornado-related fatalities and 60 percent of the injuries.

Note that central Virginia was affected by all of the major outbreaks shown here, with the exception of the April 3-4, 1974 "Super Outbreak."

## 38 Tornadoes – Sept. 17, 2004 (Hurricane Ivan)

Hurricane Ivan touched off 118 tornadoes from Florida to Pennsylvania after slamming into the Gulf Coast, more than any other tropical system on record.

The strongest one to hit Virginia – rated F3 on the Fujita Scale – damaged this home in the Remington area of Fauquier County on Sept. 17, 2004. Across the state, the tornadoes injured 12 people.

## 19 Tornadoes – April 27-28, 2011

The largest tornado outbreak in U.S. history hit the western half of Virginia with a rare ferocity. Of the 362 confirmed touchdowns in the U.S., 19 of them tracked through Virginia on April 27 and 28, 2011.

This aerial photo from April 28, 2011 provided by the Virginia State Police shows damaged buildings in Glade Spring where an EF-3 tornado with 140 mph winds crossed Interstate 81.

The Washington County storm killed three people and injured 50. Another tornado in Halifax County killed one person and injured 7.

## 18 Tornadoes – Aug. 6, 1993 (Tri-Cities outbreak)

The worst tornado in central Virginia's history tore through Petersburg, Colonial Heights and Hopewell on Aug. 6, 1993. The Tri-Cities tornado claimed four lives and injured nearly 250 people.

That day brought a total of 18 tornadoes from the Piedmont to the Eastern Shore, and 5 more in North Carolina.

## 14 Tornadoes – Aug. 30, 2004 (Hurricane Gaston remnants)

Gaston will long be remembered for its deadly and terrifying flash floods in the Richmond area, but that tropical system also spawned more than a dozen tornadoes in central and eastern Virginia on Aug. 30, 2004.

This picture from the James City County Fire Department shows a funnel cloud behind Jamestown High School.

Of the 14 tornadoes that day, none caused injuries or major damage.

## 14 Tornadoes – Sept. 8, 2004 (Hurricane Frances)

Only a week before Ivan's historic tornado outbreak and a week after Gaston, Hurricane Frances also touched off a significant tornado swarm in Virginia on Sept. 8, 2004.

In all, Frances produced 103 tornadoes between Florida and the Mid-Atlantic.

There were no injuries in Virginia, but one particular tornado tracked for nearly 18 miles through Caroline, King George and Stafford.

Lee Mills, in the foreground, and his brother, Clayton, cleaned up debris at their mother's home in Bowling Green. The tornado destroyed her garage and toppled several large trees at her residence.

## 12 Tornadoes – April 16, 2011

A tornado rated EF-3 tracked nearly 47 miles through Surry, James City, York, Gloucester, and Mathews, which was the longest damage track on record in Virginia.

Two people died, 24 were injured, and Page Middle School in Gloucester suffered severe damage pictured here.

Between April 14 and April 16, 2011, 177 tornadoes occurred between the Great Plains and Mid-Atlantic. North Carolina was especially hard-hit by the outbreak.

## 11 Tornadoes – April 28, 2008

Nearly a dozen tornadoes crossed the southeastern corner of Virginia on April 28, 2008, the most powerful of which was an EF-3 that injured more than 200 people in Suffolk.

Less than 15 years after the 1993 Tri-Cities disaster, the shopping district in Colonial Heights was hit again. The EF-1 tornado flipped cars in the parking lot of the Target and Best Buy, and tossed a half-ton air conditioning unit nearly 300 yards according to the National Weather Service. There were no deaths, but 21 people were hurt in Colonial Heights.

## 10 Tornadoes – Sept. 17, 2018 (Hurricane Florence remnants)

Of the ten tornadoes spawned by Florence on Sept. 17, 2018, nine were concentrated in the Richmond metro area. Another hit Mecklenburg County.

The EF-2 tornado in Chesterfield County killed one man on Hull Street Road.

## April 3-4, 1974 "Super Outbreak"

The "Super Outbreak" of April 1974 deserves mention here, even though it no longer ranks as one of the largest tornado events for Virginia.

Six tornadoes hit the mountains of Virginia on the morning of April 4, 1974, including one that caused extensive damage and injured several people on the north side of Roanoke. Another early-morning tornado killed one person and injured four across Washington and Smyth counties.

It happened in the final hours of one of the worst outbreaks in U.S. history. There were 148 tornadoes across 13 states, many of which produced long paths of severe damage.

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

## April 4, 1974 Headlines

Read more about the 1974 Roanoke tornado [in this 2002 Roanoke Times story](#).

## More April tornadoes

This radar animation shows the storms that caused a string of tornadoes in Bedford and Campbell counties on April 28, 2002, injuring 12 people.

Other recent April tornadoes in Virginia:

**April 8, 2011**: an EF-2 tornado in Pulaski County injured 9 people.

**April 19, 2013**: an EF-1 tornado damaged apartments and a shopping plaza in Fredericksburg.

**April 6, 2017**: 8 small tornadoes struck Tidewater and Northern Virginia.

**April 15, 2018**: a swarm of tornadoes hit the U.S. Highway 29 corridor between Greensboro, Danville and Lynchburg. An EF-3 tornado injured 12 people in Amherst County.

## Major tornado outbreaks in Virginia

The list of major outbreaks contains mostly recent events, but that doesn't imply that tornadoes are getting worse over time. It's mostly due to the constantly-improving technology and techniques we use keep track of tornadoes.

There are accounts of violent tornadoes ripping across our region throughout the 18th, 19th and early 20th Century, but the official database kept by the National Weather Service only begins in 1950. It's difficult to know the full extent of what happened prior to then.

Nowadays, it's more likely that a weak tornado in a rural area would get reported, surveyed and counted than it would have even 30 years ago.

In coming decades, climate change may shift some big-picture behavior of severe weather, but the details of any particular storm are always going to be driven by the ingredients on that day's weather map.

Make no mistake: tornadoes are an ominous part of our past and future weather in Virginia.

### **JOHN BOYER / TIMES-DISPATCH**

#### Stay informed

Thanks to today's technology, severe weather usually doesn't come without warning. But if you aren't paying attention or aren't able to receive alerts, you can still be caught off guard.

On days when severe storms are in the forecast – especially during overnight hours when you may be asleep – make sure you have a way to receive alerts issued by the National Weather Service.

Be extra vigilant if you plan to be traveling, camping or otherwise out of the loop on a severe weather day.

#### NOAA Weather Radio

Think of it like a smoke detector for severe weather. Every business and public building should have one, and it's a great idea for a home too. A weather radio will receive alerts even if the power is out or the mobile network is down. Newer models let you receive alerts only for a particular city or county. Just remember to check the batteries.

## Wireless Emergency Alerts for smartphones

New devices automatically receive Wireless Emergency Alerts for urgent nearby situations like tornado warnings, flash floods, Amber Alerts and other civil emergencies. It will help if you're on the road and travel into a warned area (reminder: during a tornado, a car is one of the worst places to be).

WEA won't relay severe thunderstorm warnings, and that's where a trusted local weather app can keep you in the loop.

## Local alerts

Many localities have a free service that sends emergency notifications via email, text message or a phone call to landlines. Usually, these will be based on your home address. In addition to severe weather, these services can alert you to things like evacuations and missing persons. Look at your local government's official website or call your emergency manager's office to find out about enrolling.

**JOHN BOYER / RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH**