

2026 Atlantic Hurricane Season Outlook

May 2026

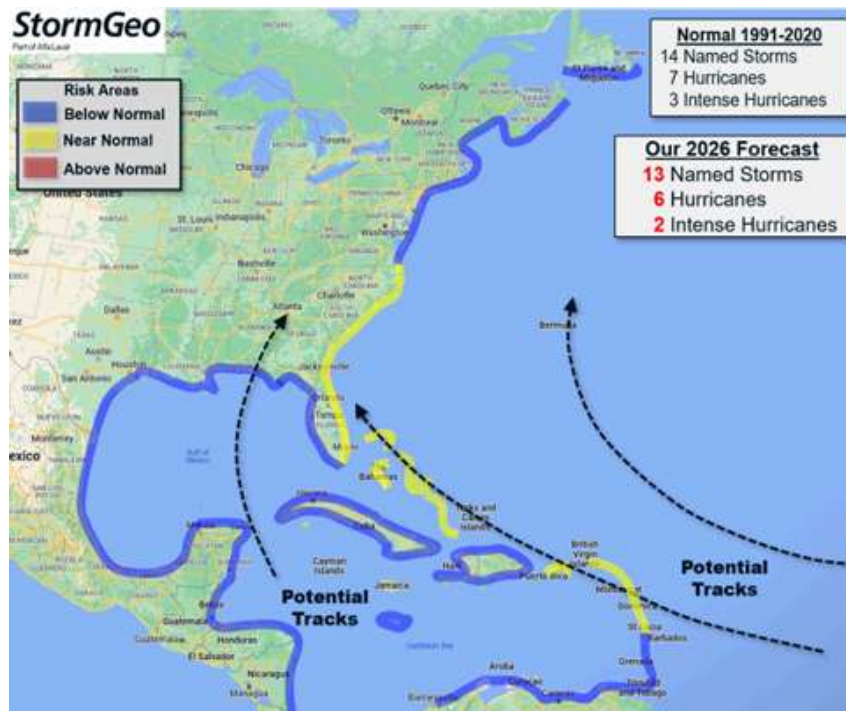


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2026 Atlantic Hurricane Season Outlook: A Return of El Niño

Key factors influencing the tropical Atlantic Basin:

- ✓ Return of El Niño
- ✓ Potentially high wind shear
- ✓ Primary analog seasons featuring hurricane development in the northwest Caribbean.



2026 Risk Areas

Season Outlook

The start of the 2026 hurricane season is fast-approaching. In this outlook, we will be looking at some of the indicators that can help identify what type of season to expect. There will be another update in mid-May.

El Niño/La Niña

The La Niña event of 2025 has ended and is expected to transition to El Niño conditions by summer, with some models suggesting a potentially strong event. El Niño is defined by warmer-than-average sea surface temperatures in the eastern tropical Pacific, which typically enhances convection and storm activity in that region. This shift can increase hurricane formation in the Pacific basin due to greater instability and rising air. In contrast, the associated atmospheric pattern promotes sinking air over the Caribbean and tropical Atlantic, which can suppress storm development. The degree of this suppression will depend on how strong El Niño becomes during the peak months of August and September. If El Niño intensifies, it would likely lead to reduced hurricane activity in the Atlantic this season.

Atlantic Water Temperatures

Sea surface temperatures east of the Caribbean are slightly below average, largely due to stronger easterly trade winds during the winter months. In contrast, temperatures across the Caribbean are above normal, while the Gulf of Mexico and the subtropical Atlantic are experiencing well above-average warmth. This distribution of warmer and cooler waters can help indicate the types of atmospheric flow patterns that may develop during the upcoming hurricane season. Additionally, elevated water temperatures can provide increased heat energy, potentially supporting stronger hurricanes if atmospheric conditions are favorable for development. The current Atlantic temperature pattern is broadly consistent with past seasons that have exhibited below-average activity.

Wind Shear

The long-range European model indicates that wind shear may be unusually elevated across the Caribbean and tropical Atlantic during the upcoming season. This outlook is likely influenced, in part, by projections of a relatively strong El Niño developing during the peak months. Increased wind shear in the Caribbean and areas east of it would act to suppress hurricane development in those regions. However, if these stronger shear conditions do not extend northward into the Gulf of Mexico, the environment there could remain more favorable, potentially supporting nearshore tropical development during the season.

Analog Seasons

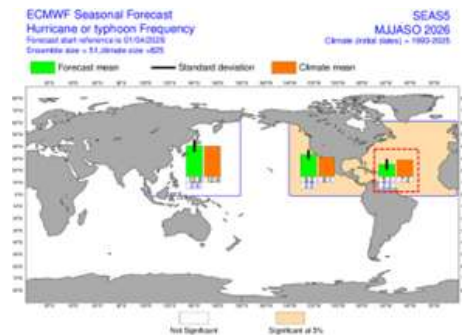
An analog season refers to a past year with ocean temperature patterns and atmospheric conditions similar to those currently observed. The premise is that when present-day tropical conditions closely resemble those of a historical season, overall activity may follow a comparable pattern in terms of storm frequency and track behavior. For the 2026 season, identified analog years are categorized as primary and secondary to guide expectations. The primary analogs suggest slightly below-normal activity, with approximately 12 named storms, 6–7 hurricanes, and 2 major hurricanes. Notably, these primary analog years also featured development in the northwestern Caribbean, indicating a potential for elevated hurricane risk in the Gulf of Mexico.

Year	Named Storms (normal = 14)	Hurricanes (normal = 7)	Intense Hurricanes (normal = 3)
1969	18	12	3
2006	10	5	2
2009	9	3	2
2015	11	4	2
2002	12	4	2
2012	19	10	2
2018	15	8	2
2019	18	6	3
Avg. (primary)	12.1	6	2.25
Primary + Secondary	14	6.5	2.25

European Model Forecast

The forecast extends through October and indicates below-normal hurricane activity across the Atlantic basin, with only five hurricanes projected during this period. In years influenced by a strong El Niño, the Atlantic hurricane season often tapers off earlier, sometimes concluding by November.

The European model's projection of elevated wind shear across the deep tropics is a key factor supporting the expectation of reduced hurricane activity this season, as stronger shear generally inhibits storm development and organization.



Our Early May Forecast

Signals for this year point to near-normal to slightly below-normal numbers of named storms, assuming a moderate to strong El Niño develops. With increased wind shear expected from the Caribbean to the eastern Atlantic, storm activity may shift farther north into the subtropical Atlantic, including areas from the Bahamas to the southeastern U.S. coast. At the same time, more favorable conditions in the Gulf of Mexico could support nearshore development. As a result, the likelihood of impacts in both regions may be slightly above average.

For 2026, the forecast calls for 13 named storms, including 6 hurricanes and 2 major hurricanes. This is below the 30-year climatological average of 14 named storms, 7 hurricanes, and 3 major hurricanes.

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