

When Storms Spin Out of Control

Tornadoes have left several states reeling.

By Kathryn Hoffman

(LA PLATA, MARYLAND) The storm lasted just a few seconds, but the damage was terrible. A black funnel cloud tore through town, turning 20 blocks of homes and offices in La Plata, Maryland, to rubble. The howling winds stripped bark from trees and sent roofs and cars soaring into the air.

After the twister passed, people slowly shuffled out into the silence that followed. They wandered, dazed, through the fallen trees, splintered wood and broken glass. Deborah McClain, who had found shelter in her family's basement, was safe but scared. "I went upstairs, and all you could see was the sky," she says. "The roof was gone. The beds had gone out the window."

Similar scenes stretched across the eastern half of the U.S. A powerful batch of tornadoes and thunderstorms hit states from Missouri to New York. Six people were killed and more than 100 injured. At the northern edge of the storm, in Wisconsin and Minnesota, heavy snow fell.

Picking Up the Pieces

Nearly 1,000 tornadoes hit the U.S. each year. Unlike hurricanes, which usually can be tracked days in advance, the storms that lead to tornadoes often erupt suddenly. The National Weather Service issued a severe thunderstorm warning. But a



People stand on the second-floor deck of a home destroyed by a tornado in La Plata, Maryland, on April 28.



As a tornado approaches, a funnel cloud forms, demolishing buildings and snarling traffic.

tornado warning did not go out until just eight minutes before the twister hit La Plata.

The spring storms were unusually severe. The system unleashed 48 tornadoes. According to the National Weather Service, the twister that hit La Plata was an F5 on the Fujita Tornado Damage Scale. An F5 rating is the worst, with fierce winds of up to 318 miles an hour. Only one in 1,000 tornadoes are that powerful.

On Wednesday, President Bush declared southern Maryland a disaster area. The state will receive money for its recovery effort. Folks in La Plata have started to rebuild.

AMAZING FACTS ABOUT TORNADOES

Did you know that the average tornado. . .

- has winds that whip around at about 112 miles per hour (mph) and can reach up to 250 mph.
- is about 400–500 feet wide.
- covers 4–5 miles of ground.
- lasts for a few minutes.
- moves at speeds of about 20–50 mph.

Comprehension Connection



Before Reading

1. What do you know about tornadoes?
2. Why are tornadoes so dangerous?
3. What safety measures should you take during a tornado?

During Reading

1. Which detail about the tornado do you find most impressive? Why?
2. Why is it useful to have a system like the Fujita Scale that rates the force of a storm?
3. In what ways was the storm system described in the article unusual?

After Reading

1. How does the direct quote of a tornado victim help describe the tornado?
2. What are some words the author uses that bring the power of the storm to life?
3. How does the article communicate truths about life? What are they?

Skill Focus

Using Text Organizers

How do you read a newspaper? Back to front? Comics or sports section first? No matter where you start, you probably use certain features to help you understand what you read.

Your first stop is the title. The title of this news story tells the general topic of the story: powerful storms. The subtitle provides a more specific topic: a tornado system that struck several states. The title and subtitle preview the main ideas of the article.

The news story also has a subhead, or section title: “Picking Up the Pieces.” It provides another main idea of the story. In addition, the article includes a sidebar, a box with additional facts. Its title tells just what you will find in this section.

All these parts of the news story help you understand the article’s facts. They enable you to find the story’s major ideas easily.

Use titles and subtitles to preview the content of an article. They prepare your mind for what you are about to read. Also use them to locate specific facts. They are a map to the article’s details.

Writer's World

1. What interesting weather event has happened recently in your area? Write a newspaper article about the event. Use the news story on the card as a model.
2. Imagine that you are a person who is in the path of a tornado. Write a description of what happens using that person’s point of view.
3. Research the Fujita Tornado Damage Scale. Write a description that summarizes each rating on the scale.

