

Oklahoma Approaches Peak Tornado Season

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NORMAN - With only a handful of tornadoes reported this year, it would probably be correct to say that Oklahoma's tornado experience has been relatively benign thus far during 2002. However, that statement should not lull Oklahomans into a false sense of security concerning the remainder of the spring season, especially entering May - the state's peak tornado month.

Since 1950, when accurate tornado record keeping began, Oklahoma has averaged 15 tornadoes from January through April. The state's total so far this year is well below that, according to Doug Speheger, a forecaster with the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Norman. "I just confirmed 2 damage paths from April 17th up in Alfalfa County, and there were 2 or 3 other tornadoes that same day. Along with the tornadoes earlier this month, we've probably had on the order of 7 or 8 so far this year." That meager tornado total would rank this January-April period as the 9th lowest since 1950. This ranking is in contrast to 1957, when 44 tornadoes struck during the first four months of the year. "Any way you want to slice it, Oklahoma is below normal in the number of tornadoes so far this year," Speheger said.

A slow January-April period, however, is not necessarily indicative of tornado prospects for the rest of the severe weather season and beyond. The 1st and 2nd lowest January-April tornado totals since 1950 occurred in 1998 and 1997, with two and three tornadoes, respectively. In those two years, however, May had above-normal tornado totals: 22 during 1998 and 43 during 1997. In fact, the month of May averages 20 tornadoes, greater than the total for the first four months of the year combined. This has been the case for four out of the last five years. For example, during 2001, the state had only 10 confirmed tornadoes before May, but experienced 25 that month. The extreme case occurred in 1999, when Oklahomans were subjected to 91 tornadoes during May. Included in that total were the devastating May 3rd tornadoes, which cut a swath of destruction across central Oklahoma - killing 40, injuring close to 700, and totaling over \$1 billion in damage.

The year 1999 also exemplifies the erratic nature of tornadoes in Oklahoma, not only in number, but location as well. Although the statewide annual average is just over 54 tornadoes, the 1999 record total of 146 twisters is 39 more than the 2nd closest total of 107 in 1957. "That many tornadoes is a ridiculous number for any year, but the really strange thing is that in 1999, south-central Oklahoma had no confirmed tornadoes," Speheger explained.

The fewest number of tornadoes for any year is 17, which occurred in 1988. Nobody knows if this year's tornado crop will be closer to 1999 than 1998. But, as every

Oklahoman knows, tornadoes can occur any time of the day, any time of the year, and at any location in the state.

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AVERAGE TORNADOES BY MONTH FOR OKLAHOMA 1950-2001

