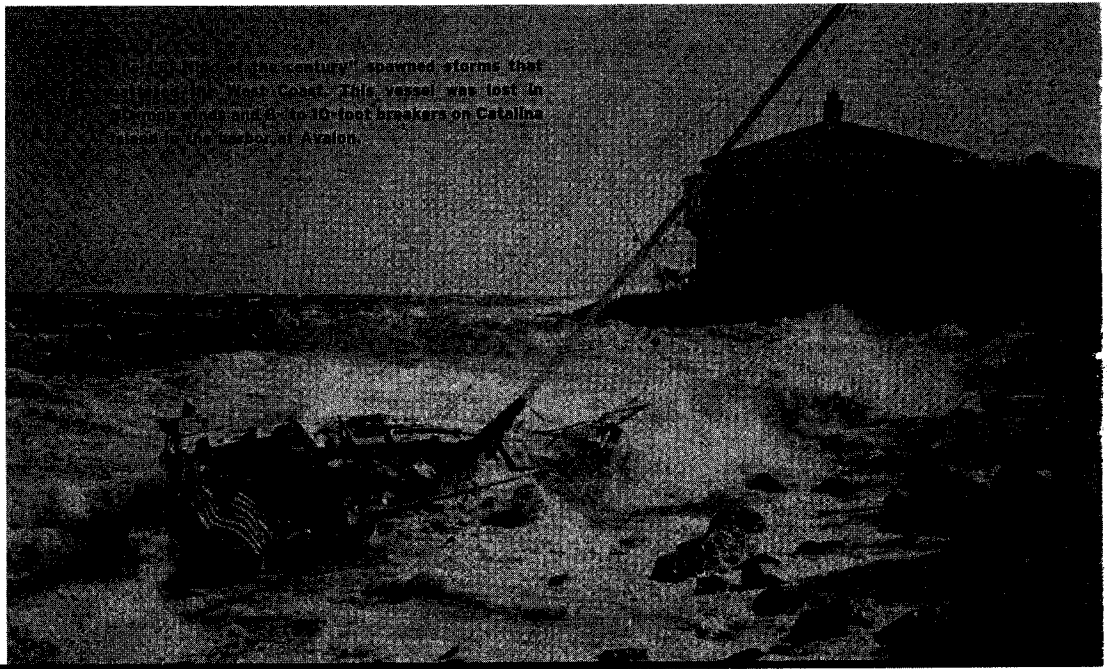


IN DEPTH



TRENDS, ANALYSIS, PEOPLE

WEATHER

El Niño's flip side: good boating weather

Forecasters generally are bullish, but hurricane activity could be up

By Jim Flannery

SENIOR WRITER

Farmers might not be happy with Ken Campbell's forecast, but if El Niño moderates as expected, he foresees better-than-usual boating weather all over the country this summer and fall — except for a late summer resurgence of hurricanes in the North Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico.

"Seventy-five percent of summers are hot and dry from Virginia north after an El Niño," says Campbell. He expects drier, warmer weather in the Midwest, too, and a decrease in the storms that have been hammering California and the Southeast, including Florida. That should mean fewer rainy days generally, and maybe a slightly longer boating season up north.

"El Niño is fading out," says Campbell, supplier of weather reports to the Whitbread Round the World Race Web site and weather forecaster for the Whitbread entry Swedish Match and the Royal Ocean Racing Club. "It will entirely fade out by fall, if not by summer."

Campbell foresees a big Bermuda high this summer, bringing hot, dry summer weather to the Atlantic Seaboard above Virginia, and stronger-than-normal east to southeast trade winds to Florida, the Bahamas and Gulf of Mexico.

Other meteorologists also are bullish on the second half of 1998. "I think

it's going to be a great summer, really," says Chris Bedford, director of operations for Weather Services Corp. of Lexington, Mass., which also forecasts weather for Whitbread entries and an America's Cup team.

He foresees normal rainfall and average temperatures, except for maybe slightly above-average temperatures from the Carolinas to Cape Cod.

Campbell, an 18-year weather forecasting veteran and operator of Commander's Weather, a forecasting and routing service in Nashua, N.H., says interest in the lingering effects of El Niño is high among ocean racers, who must anticipate strategy for the June 19 Newport-to-Bermuda Race.

He predicts average or slightly lighter-than-normal winds over the course. "A very summer-like race," he says. With the Bermuda high building, he foresees southwest winds at the race's start in Newport, R.I., light winds over the Gulf Stream south, and southeasterlies going into Bermuda.

Campbell notes one downside to the warmer New England weather he is predicting: Expect more fog off the Maine coast this summer.

Most meteorologists agree on one thing about El Niño: As it fades, conditions that stymied tropical storm and hurricane development in the Atlantic last hurricane season will change, and the frequency of these storms will return to normal — increase — in late summer and fall.

"There will be more tropical

storms and hurricanes this summer than last," says Chidong Zhang, a meteorologist at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science.

Trans-Atlantic cruisers shouldn't encounter much of a hurricane problem in early summer when most Atlantic ocean crossings are made, but "a late season, trans-Atlantic crossing is going to be tougher," Campbell predicts. A run-in with a tropical storm or hurricane will be more likely then.

Cruisers from California to Hawaii should have clear sailing in late May, June and the first half of July, Campbell says. He expected stormy Pacific weather to dissipate by May, with El Niño's departure and fewer big hurricanes this season off the west coast of

Mexico and Central America. Bedford, however, foresees — because of El Niño — an earlier-than-usual hurricane season, possibly developing in the Pacific this summer, as early as July.

As El Niños go, this one was a granddaddy, born a year ago June. "This El Niño is the El Niño of the century," says Zhang.

It caused flooding in the southern United States and Peru, drought in the western Pacific (Auckland was without electricity for weeks after record-setting high temperatures overtaxed its electrical grid) and

Clockwise from right: Meteorologist and fishing forecaster Mitchell A. Roffer foresees continuing impacts on fishing from El Niño-related weather; the breakwall in Dana Point Harbor is all that separates this patrol vessel from the fury of an El Niño storm; Laura Ciorro's cat, Shipwrecked, used up one of its nine lives escaping its owner's boat, which was pounded in storm surf on Catalina Island.



(TOP, BOTTOM LEFT) DAVID J. SKOFF; (BOTTOM RIGHT) BOB GRIESE