

## Hurricane Hazel—Central Ontario (1954)



Hurricane Hazel created severe flooding in central Ontario, washing out more than 50 bridges and leaving many residents without homes.

Hurricane Hazel, the eighth tropical storm of the Atlantic hurricane season of 1954, was the worst of the year. The storm was so deadly that the name was retired from use. It killed a thousand people in Haiti, spread destruction and death along the coast of the Carolinas as a category 4 hurricane, and was still a category 1 hurricane on October 15 when it reached Toronto, more than 1,000 kilometres from its origin. In less than 24 hours, 200 millimetres of rain fell, and rivers flooded. Water levels rose by as much as 8 metres. Winds of 110 kilometres an hour buffeted buildings and scattered debris.

Another 81 people were killed in central Ontario by Hazel, most of them in Toronto. The flooding caused massive damage, washing out more than 50 of Toronto's bridges, including some on major highways. Streets were washed away, as were railways, houses and other buildings. Thousands were left without homes. The total damage in Toronto was estimated at \$25 million in 1954 dollars. A flash flood in Toronto's Humber River was devastating. One section of Raymore Drive, which ran parallel to the river, was completely washed away: the street, the homes on it, and the people in them. Thirty-five people died. In Woodbridge, nine other people were killed by the Humber's flash flood, and dozens of houses were ruined.

The area north of Toronto also flooded: Highway 400 was under 6 metres of water in some areas. Holland Marsh—a flat, fertile piece of land that was an important vegetable-growing area—slowly flooded. Most of the crop, a lot of it harvested but not yet transported, was destroyed, and it was feared that its fertile farmland had also been destroyed.

People attempted to drain the Holland Marsh. However, the pumps kept getting clogged, frustrating their efforts. Money was donated in order to purchase better equipment, and, through perseverance, the marsh was drained within a month of the storm. Although it was feared that the rich soil had been ruined and that economic losses would continue as future growing seasons suffered, in fact the following years had higher than average yields.

The fall of 1954 had been a particularly wet one for central Ontario, with above-average rainfall. This meant that the water table was already saturated when Hazel arrived on the scene, causing the flooding. According to some estimates, 90 per cent of the rain that Hazel dumped on Toronto went directly into creeks and rivers rather than seeping into the ground. The damage was made more severe by the fact that flooding in the area is rare, so the buildings and infrastructure were not built to withstand such an occurrence. In addition, the flood plain was well developed and covered by roads and buildings—all of which were overcome with flood water or simply washed away.

Hurricane Hazel caused the most severe flooding in Toronto in over 200 years.

### Additional reading

Environment Canada. "Hurricane Hazel—Storm Information." <http://www.ec.gc.ca/ouragans-hurricanes/default.asp?lang=En&n=5C4829A9-1>.

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Seislowski, Stan. "Hurricane Hazel." *The Times Magazine*. <http://www.walkervilletimes.com/38/hurricane-hazel.html>.

Toronto and Region Conservation and ThinData. "Hurricane Hazel, 60 years later." <http://www.hurricanehazel.ca>