Fort Erie Windstorms: Mother Nature's Mayhem

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Saturday, December 11, 2021, another windstorm crashed in on Fort Erie. Many of the usual spots, the waterfront land by Mather Arch, Waverly Beach, Waterfront Park, Bay Beach and Point Abino Road were hit, once again, by wind forces over 100 km/hour, causing more damage to each location. Thousands lost power between Fort Erie and Port Colborne.

Simultaneously, hundreds of people bundled themselves up and headed out, towards the wild and whipped up Lake Erie with its 20-foot high waves, some with cameras, some just to witness the tremendous force of nature for themselves.

Stories began to unfold on local Facebook groups. The drama played out in posted photos and comments. Some were able to contribute without leaving their homes.

It began with the "calm before the storm".

Rodney Kazmir captured a rainbow that arched from Canada to the US and posted on the group, Fort Erie – "Our Town". It was during the moments before the wind picked up, the calm before the storm. Several others posted photos of the rainbow on social media.

A giant roll cloud that approached Crystal Beach's Waterfront Park about 4:30pm was captured by Rick Doan, who commented, "Standing there was like getting sandblasted from the wind throwing the beach sand."

Videos taken show that by 5:30pm, the Niagara Parks land between the entrance of the river and Lakeshore Road was underwater.

Down the shore, breathtaking photos of the waves crashing against the historical ruins at Waverly / Erie Beach amazed our community. One photographer, Brian Holt, made the comment of having to bob and weave while shooting the scene but could not escape the spray.

Inland, water flooded over roads, trees and branches of all sizes came crashing down, as well as hydro poles and lines.

The communication tower by the Crystal Ridge Library collapsed. The next day, the library announced it would be closed for repairs until further notice.

By the end of the storm, the surge of water had pushed its way to Mather Arch. Dan Andrews captured the Cenotaph after nightfall, looking out towards the Peace Bridge and the Niagara River, with water underfoot.

Dan captioned, "Flooded out at Mather's but its still beautiful."

Photos posted of the aftermath, the next day, spoke a thousand words with boulders flung, once again, several metres on land and part of a stone wall collapsed at Waterfront Park in Crystal Beach. The underground parking of developing condos where once the Palmwood stood, was flooded. More of an already beaten up Point Abino Road was torn away.

Allan Hackett and Laurie Allan, two of Fort Erie's storm chasers and photographers, are very aware that, as much as getting out there and getting those amazing captures of Mother Nature's magnificence is incredibly exhilarating and thrilling, it is also very dangerous and they have great respect for its power.

"We're out chasing every storm there is." Laurie shared. For the storm this past December, they spent both the day of the storm and the day after taking videos and photos of every beach and lakefront, from the river's mouth past Point Abino.

Al told his story about standing in the water to capture the storm on camera. “The water was up to my ankles. Someone yelled, ‘Get out of the water, Al!’ The waves were splashing right up to my chest. Good thing I had my phone in the air. I got soaked three times and had to come home to change.”

When talking about the many storm chasers and curious observers who rushed down to the waters, Al commented, “I met guys from Niagara-on-the-Lake down there. They brought a wind indicator, all kinds of weather gear. They wanted to study the storm. I got them on video but it’s so hard to hear because the wind was so strong.”

Laurie described the pool at the Erie Beach dancehall ruins, “It filled right up. You couldn’t see the sidewalls at all. It was just water, everywhere.”

Since they were at all the beaches, I asked, to them, where did it look like it was hit the hardest? Laurie answered, “It hit pretty hard at Waverly. But one of the beaches we really noticed a difference was at Pleasant Beach, on the other side of Point Abino, down a way. So much of that sand was pulled out. It was unbelievable.”

They also received permission to walk through Marcy’s Woods, to that beach. “I took a picture of a surfer climbing over a tree to get to the beach. The tree had fallen onto the path to the beach.” Hackett mentioned that some of the trees in the woods have been affected.

Laurie commented in dismay, “The beach was really hit. Oh my gosh, just the damage that’s done.”

When talking about the past few years, Laurie remarked, “We’ve noticed the difference along the lakeshore because of these storms. We notice a lot of the trees, now their roots are exposed where they weren’t before. Pipes are exposed that were once buried. We’ve seen rocks that are very unusual, rocks that have been exposed. And the damage of the water hitting the concrete at Waverly. It’s so sad. Every time there’s a storm now, it seems to get damaged even more.”

Both Al and Laurie talked about the gradual erosion at areas like Lakeshore Road and Point Abino Road.

And about the Waverly / Erie Beach shore, Laurie commented, “It’s now just flattened completely. The other day we went down there to walk. It was flat. There’s nothing left. Just unbelievable.”

The couple, who both grew up in the Fort Erie area, would like those who are new to the area to, while being amazed, be aware. Laurie stated, “People don’t realize the power of that water. I think this is all so unfamiliar to people. It’s all new. So, of course, we all get caught up in wanting to see it, experience it. And we really don’t realize the danger. I mean, if that water can move concrete, what can it do to us?”

Some Past Storms

Over the years, there have been several witnessed and reported windstorms. These are just a few.

November 13, 2015 – Town of Fort Erie posted on Facebook, "The windstorm caused some damage to the break wall last night. The small parking lots in that area were closed. NPC is clearing debris and should have the area open this morning. That was a powerful storm."

February 24, 2019 – Local newspapers printed, "A massive windstorm creates a wild-looking ice shove, causing flooding and power outages. 'Ice shove' is a phenomenon that sometimes occurs during heavy winds in winter. The winds push the snow and ice up, onto the shore, in Fort Erie's case, over the break wall." The ice piled up well over people's heads. Some news sources referred to it as an ice tsunami.

Halloween Night, 2019 – According to a Town of Fort Erie blog post, "On October 31, 2019, Fort Erie experienced unprecedented and extraordinary weather events including high winds, rain and flooding. Following the weather events, Town Staff estimated over $1 million worth of damages."

It was this storm that caused the shocking damage to the shore of Waverly Woods, destroying a section of the sidewalk.

January 12, 2020 – One videographer who specializes in documenting storms reported, this storm, compared to the previous Halloween storm, was not as powerful but was still a shock to wake up to, as the storm came in during the early morning hours.

November 15, 2020 – "Niagara was hit the hardest out of all of southern Ontario Sunday with strong winds that could be considered a low-level hurricane," says Environment Canada meteorologist Peter Kimbell. A reading of gusts reaching 141 km/h registered at the Niagara District Airport weather station Sunday evening.

This is the storm that took down the beloved, four-legged, amusement park ruin along the shore of Waverly Woods at Erie Beach. The large concrete wall that was a part of the dancehall and covered in graffiti was also toppled on this evening.

So, what is going on with all of these windstorms?

Well, first thing, they are nothing new.

The Buffalo / Fort Erie area may have a reputation for snowstorms off Lake Erie, but apparently, we are known for our tsunamis, too.

Tsunamis? What?

According to a Buffalonews.com article, "No, not 100-foot wall-of-water, earthquake-driven tsunamis that swamp faraway places in the Pacific. The tsunamis around here are different and pass with little impact. They're called meteotsunamis," also known as seiches and storm surges, "and researchers have determined more than 100 of them happen on the Great Lakes every year.

New research reveals Buffalo gets more of them than most other Great Lakes ports." And that means us.

"Lake Michigan's Calumet Harbor in Illinois gets the most. On average, there are 29 there every year. Buffalo is second with 17."

A team of Midwestern scientists, who have examined a number of these historic accounts, stated in a Chigagotribune.com article about Lake Michigan meteotsunami waves. "These episodes still aren't well understood by the public and are often confused with other incidents."

Erienewsnow.com reported, there are two ingredients to a meteotsunami: A sudden change of air pressure, which can generate waves like when you toss a pebble in the water. With the help of fast moving thunderstorms matching the speed of those waves, the water can be pushed towards land, inundating the shoreline and causing considerable property damage or loss of life.

Filmmaker, a photojournalist, and avid explorer, Stephen Powell, has reported on many networks. In his video *Forgotten World,* Powell shares a major, historical event.

"On October 19, 1844, where the lake and the river meet, something remarkable happened. It was what some people would call a tidal wave or a tsunami that came in off the lake from a prevailing wind, into Buffalo."

When the water came in, it crept up quietly to a height of around 22 feet, which is a second story. And when the waters receded, it pulled the houses and many people back out, into the water.

"This was 1844." It was not the city it is now. "There was no electricity. No phones. No way to tell anyone anything."

Powell explains in the video while using his arms to quickly move back and forth, "When the wind shifts in a given area, the water shifts with it. It's like carrying a big tub of water in your arms and you're trying to keep it from splashing back and forth. That's what happens when the wind suddenly changes directions on the Great Lakes."

This effect is particularly enhanced by the fact that Lake Erie is quite shallow. So, that wind really changes the impact of the water shift and that surge.

When comparing current times with the days of 1844, "Obviously, the destruction is not the same. We've built re-enforcements to protect against these surges." In 1844, the city was open to the water.

Good News

In December, this past month, it was announced that Fort Erie will be receiving up to $7.4 million in provincial disaster recovery funding to help repair essential municipal infrastructure, roads trails, a water main, shoreline protection, and docks damaged by the October 31, 2019 windstorm.

Time to re-enforce the re-enforcements.

Pictured; *Giant roll cloud at 4:30pm – Rick Doan*

There are no upcoming events at this time.

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