

U.S.

East Coast Battens Down for Arrival of Hurricane Irene

By BRIAN STELTER AUG. 25, 2011

KILL DEVIL HILLS, N.C. — John H. Woolard, who is 79 years old, cannot remember how many hurricanes he has confronted at his home, also 79, which sits on stilts overlooking the Atlantic Ocean here. Is it 12? Or 14?

“I have never left,” he said proudly on Thursday afternoon, showing off a photograph he took of a storm in 1962. “But I think I’m going to leave this time.”

“This one,” he said, referring to Hurricane Irene, “is dead on us.”

It was a day of weather wake-up calls for residents from North Carolina to Maine as the storm pummeled the Bahamas.

A forecast track that a day earlier predicted the hurricane would pass just off North Carolina’s fragile Outer Banks shifted west on Thursday morning, putting a weekend bull’s-eye on Wilmington, N.C.; Virginia Beach; Atlantic City; and New York City and jolting beachgoers and old-timers alike.

The National Hurricane Center said late Thursday night that maximum winds at the center of the hurricane were 115 miles per hour, making it a Category 3 storm.

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were posted in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey, where the storm is expected to lash coastal areas before reaching New York in a somewhat weakened state on Sunday.

In Washington, the storm forced organizers to indefinitely postpone the dedication of the new memorial to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which was scheduled for Sunday.

W. Craig Fugate, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said the hurricane was likely to drop as much as 10 inches of rain in some areas. "This will not just be a coastal storm," he said. "We can see impacts well inland."

Amtrak announced that it was canceling train service for Friday, Saturday and Sunday south of Washington because of the storm. Service in the Northeast Corridor is not affected.

Forecasters said Irene presented some unusual problems. For one thing, it is uncommonly large: hurricane-force winds of at least 74 m.p.h. extended 70 miles from its center on Thursday, and winds of at least 40 m.p.h. reached 255 miles out.

The storm was also moving due north slowly, about 14 m.p.h., compared with speeds of 30 to 40 m.p.h. for similar storms, said Dennis Feltgen, a spokesman for the hurricane center. Both the hurricane's size and slow pace could intensify flooding in the Middle Atlantic states and in the Northeast, where the ground is already saturated in places from heavy rains this summer.

A tropical storm warning was also in effect in South Carolina, and conditions along the coast there are expected to deteriorate as the hurricane passes on Friday. It spared Florida for the most part as it lashed the Bahamas, but the authorities in Palm Beach County said at least eight people were injured when they were hit by a hurricane-spawned wave on a Boynton Beach Inlet jetty, The Associated Press reported.

Emergencies were declared in five states, and evacuations were expanded as far

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The New Jersey evacuations were voluntary, for the time being. But here on the Outer Banks, they were mandatory, and tourists were told to leave the barrier islands as soon as possible.

By Thursday evening, a line of vehicles four miles long was snaking toward the main bridge in Kill Devil Hills. But some vacationers said they were staying put awhile longer. “We paid for a whole week; we’re staying,” said Erica Shore, 18.

Ms. Shore’s friends Johanna Farrand, 15, and Brennan Johnson, 16, noticed that the beach emptied out on Thursday. And in a phone call on Thursday, the real estate agent who rented the beach house to the group required each of them to identify their next of kin — somewhat to the teenagers’ surprise. Brennan recalled telling the agent, “Dude, we’ll be gone.”

Timothy Williams contributed reporting from New York.

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