

Weather of 1996

Cool Year with Record Precipitation, Extreme January Blizzard, and Two Massive Floods

1996 was one of the most memorable weather years ever. Many records or near records were set. The most notable weather feature of 1996 was precipitation – plenty of it. A whopping 59.05” of precipitation fell, shattering the old record of 53.17” in 1972. We had two major floods, an all-time record rain storm, an all-time record snow storm, and for good measure, a summer month that was the foggiest month ever.

Within a week of the New Year, 1996 was already breaking records. A massive, paralyzing winter storm, the great “Blizzard of 1996” moved up the east coast, dropping an incredible 30 inches in about as many hours. 23.5” of snow on the 7th set an all-time daily record. Between 10-11pm, I measured 4.5 inches in one hour! Strong winds drifted 10+ feet in some areas. Another snow storm on the 12th, 6 inches, brought the total on the ground to a record 32 inches. Within a week, however, more than half of that snow disappeared, due to a rapid warm-up ahead of a strong cold front on the 19th. On that morning, 2.17” of rain fell in a 6-hour period, combining with more snow melt to cause extreme devastating flooding that rivaled the infamous 1936 St. Patrick’s Day Flood. The Locust grove area was hardest hit, with houses completely washed away. Fortunately no one was killed, but the county was declared a federal disaster area, with over \$7 million in damage in Allegany County alone, making it the costliest natural disaster in recent history. The January 1996 flood set a record 23.11’ at Wills Creek, surpassing 1936’s 20.20’ mark. January was the wettest January and winter month on record with a whopping 7.84 inches of precipitation. 41.7” of snow fell, the snowiest month ever, beating January 1978’s 39.0” mark.

Winter continued strong into early February. 4.8” of snow fell from the 1st-3rd, and temperatures plummeted to -2 on the 4th, the coldest February reading in years. February was slightly colder and drier than normal, with slightly above normal snowfall. Most precipitation during the second half fell as rain.

March was cold, in fact the 4th coldest on record. Three days had highs in the 20s, the 8th really cold with a high of only 20. Snow came in small increments, totaling 5.5 inches. One inch fell in only 10 minutes from a rare thunder-snow squall on the evening of the 2nd. Precipitation was above normal, with the heaviest precipitation event of the month, 1.62”, falling on the 19th-20th. Winter continued at earnest with an ice storm on the 28th bringing a half-inch of sleet and freezing rain.

Winter gave us one last visit in April, with 1.5” of wet snow early on the 9th. April was the driest month of 1996, but still had over 2 inches of precipitation. Temperatures fluctuated wildly throughout the month, ranging from a nippy 23 to a fiery 88, but overall averaged about normal. On the 26th, a strong wind gust, estimated at 55 mph, completely uprooted a large bush in our backyard.

May was dreary and cool with incessant rainfall. 19 days had measurable precipitation, 15 days over a tenth of an inch, and the monthly total was 6.53”. Despite the below average temperatures, and a hard frost and freeze on the 14th, an sudden, unexpected brief heat wave immediately followed, one of the most dramatic turnarounds ever, produced the hottest temperature ever recorded for May. A sizzling high of 96 on the 19th, only 5 days after the month’s low of 29, turned out to be the year’s highest temperature.

June was very warm with many scattered thunderstorms. Many of the storms missed, especially to the north and east. However, the few that hit, hit hard. On the 8th, 0.87” of rain fell in only 15 minutes. On the 11th, a severe thunderstorm dropped 1.16” of rain in less than an hour, and produced large hail, flooding and mudslides in the western and central parts of the county. More severe weather struck the area on the 24th, when two lines of severe storms dumped 1.35” of rain and produced widespread wind damage.

Cool, wet weather dominated the weather pattern in July, especially during the second half. It was the 2nd wettest July (6.92”) and also one of the coolest, with a mean temperature of 70.6 F. The hottest temperatures came on the 14th-15th with a high of 95 both days. However, this heat was short lived. Heavy rains, totaling 2.59”, fell on the 18th-19th. This system produced several tornadoes to the north and east. Another slow-moving front dumped 2.84” of rain on the final three days of July.

August 1996 goes down as the foggiest month ever, with an astounding 28 of 31 days with fog! Temperatures were below normal again, with no 90-degree days, but relatively consistent through the month with mostly 80s and a few in the 70s, one (12th, when 1.07” of rain fell) in the 60s. On the 14th, Cumberland observer Tim Thomas reported a thunderstorm that dropped 1.62” of rain in 15 minutes.

On September 6th, Hurricane Fran hammered the area with strong winds and torrential rains. 5.20" of rain fell in only 12 hours, setting an all-time single-day record. An incredible 6.33" fell in Frostburg. This deluge resulted in the second severe flood of 1996. Rivers, creeks, roads, fields and basements were flooded everywhere. Once again, Allegany County was declared a federal disaster area. The remainder of the month continued cool and wet. 1.21" of rain fell from thunderstorms overnight on the 12th-13th, and another 1.64" fell on the 16th-17th from the remnants of Pacific tropical system Fausto. September racked up a whopping 9.87" of rainfall, making it the wettest September ever and the second wettest month ever. In addition, it ranked in the top 5 coolest Septembers ever (mean was 61.1 F).

October was another cool month. Temperatures reached a chilly 26 on the 4th with a hard, killing frost. Precipitation was below normal, despite two major systems that brought massive amounts of rainfall to our north and east. The most substantial event was a slow-moving system on the 18th-22nd that brought thunderstorms, high winds, sleet, and a total of 1.45" of rainfall.

November was exceptionally cold, the coldest on record with a mean temperature of 33.5 F. The fall of 1996 was the coldest fall ever (48.3 F) and also the wettest ever, with 18.02" of precipitation. A day-long deluge of rain on the 8th dumped a whopping 3.50", and brought high winds and even tornadoes to our northeast in Bedford Co. 2 inches of snow fell on the 14th. In addition to the coldest, November ranked 3rd wettest with 5.80" of precipitation recorded.

The first two-thirds of December were cold and wet. A thunderstorm on the evening of the 1st brought torrential rains and high winds. The storm precipitation total from Nov. 30 to Dec. 1 was 2.63". On the 5th, the first significant snow blanketed the area with 5 inches. The low temperature reached a chilly 3 F on the 21st. However, mild temperatures the last few days, reaching 63 on the 30th, offset the chilly first half of December, and temperatures wound up near average. Precipitation, again, was above normal.

1996 Weather Statistics

1996 Monthly and Annual Climate Summary LaVale, MD, Allegany County Observer Nate Mullins Station Observation Time: Midnight Lat: 39.657780°, Long: - 78.821871°, Elevation 1016'										
Month	Temperature, ° F							Number of days		
	Mean Max	Mean Min	Mean Temp	Max Temp	Date	Min Temp	Date	Max ≥ 90	Max ≤ 32	Min ≤ 32
Jan	35.7	18.9	27.3	51	18	3	11	0	12	29
Feb	38.3	23.1	30.7	64	25	-2	4	0	12	21
Mar	46.1	25.4	35.7	69	14	9	10	0	3	26
Apr	64.7	38.3	51.5	88	22	23	8	0	0	8
May	68.1	48.1	58.1	96	19	29	14	3	0	3
Jun	83.1	59.0	71.1	92	30	42	1	2	0	0
Jul	82.6	58.6	70.6	95	15*	46	21	6	0	0
Aug	82.2	59.3	70.8	88	23	48	25	0	0	0
Sep	71.3	50.9	61.1	86	8	38	26	0	0	0
Oct	61.3	39.3	50.3	76	2	26	4	0	0	6
Nov	41.9	25.1	33.5	65	8	11	15	0	3	25
Dec	39.7	26.5	33.1	63	30	3	21	0	6	26
Year	59.6	39.4	49.5	96	5/19	-2	2/4	11	36	144

Precipitation, Inches				Number of days				Snow/ice, Inches		
Month	Total Precip	Max Day	Date	> 0.01"	> 0.10"	> 0.50"	> 1.00"	Total Snow	Max Day	Date
Jan	7.84	2.17	19	18	12	5	2	41.7	23.5	7
Feb	2.19	0.44	27	14	9	0	0	11.1	4.3	2
Mar	4.38	1.39	19	13	9	3	1	5.5	1.0	20*
Apr	2.03	0.68	1	13	6	1	0	1.5	1.5	9
May	6.53	1.08	5	19	16	4	1	-	-	-
Jun	4.40	1.35	24	13	6	3	2	-	-	-
Jul	6.92	1.47	19	12	10	6	3	-	-	-
Aug	3.28	1.07	12	9	7	3	1	-	-	-
Sep	9.87	5.20	6	13	9	5	2	-	-	-
Oct	2.35	0.90	18	11	5	1	0	T	T	19
Nov	5.80	3.50	8	8	4	4	1	2.5	2.0	14
Dec	3.46	1.80	1	14	4	2	1	7.5	5.0	5
Year	59.05	5.20	9/6	157	97	37	14	69.8	23.5	1/7
Note: * = also occurred on earlier dates that month										
Number of days with										
Month	Fog	Sleet	Glaze	Thunder	Hail	Dmg wind				
Jan	6	2	0	0	0	1				
Feb	4	0	0	0	0	0				
Mar	6	2	2	2	0	0				
Apr	0	0	0	2	0	1				
May	18	0	0	8	0	0				
Jun	8	0	0	11	0	1				
Jul	7	0	0	10	0	0				
Aug	28	0	0	5	0	0				
Sep	10	0	0	3	0	0				
Oct	9	1	0	1	0	0				
Nov	0	1	1	0	0	0				
Dec	4	0	0	1	0	0				
Year	100	6	3	43	0	3				