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If there's a wind, it will find its way east

No need for hyped weather forecasts – Maritimers know to always expect the worst

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Special to the Star

HALIFAX—Environment Canada tells us we're in for a shock this winter. We're getting one of those frosty, snowy, altogether blustery long stretches we knew as kids. But what may be shocking for the rest of the country is old hat here.

In the Maritimes, blustery comes with the territory. Last week, I was blown down 90 metres on our 30-degree driveway (it's steeper than some ski hills). A gust of wind, a bit of ice and I was airborne, headed into the chill waters of St. Margaret's Bay at the end of the property.

Just another incident in Atlantic Canada's trial by windstorm.

This fall, a hurricane leaving the Caribbean settled down till it got us in its sights. Then it sped up, slamming us as a "post-tropical storm." On approach to Newfoundland, it re-emerged as a hurricane clocking 180 km/h winds, the highest of its career.

The hurricane hit a stretch of coastline routinely bombarded by a force of nature called, aptly, the Wreckhouse winds. Trains going through the Wreckhouse region have been blown off tracks and 18-wheelers off roads. Newfoundlanders say Wreckhouse blizzards are like living in a flour sack.

Sure, the rest of Canada gets windy. Ellesmere Island has the cow storm, said to blow horns off musk ox. On the Prairies, roofs get replaced every five years because the nails rattle in their holes, widening them so that the shingles lift and slip free. There are Prairie towns that blame their high divorce rates on the wind.

Down East, couples stay together – we can't afford to live apart, after all – but it's said some of us go mad in the gales, especially on Prince Edward Island, where winds slap 24/7.

The rest of the world has its blow-hards, too. The cold French mistral ruins six months of every year for vacationers in Provence. The Mediterranean sirocco dusts North Africa while it mildews Europe.

But what you really don't want is a föhn wind, first named by the Germans, who also apply the word to a brand of hair dryers. Föhns are hot and dry – the hamsin of Israel, the San Francisco Diablo, southern California's Santa Anas or "murder winds" that reach 130 km/h, even our own chinooks that issue in the Prairies' dreaded Alberta Clippers.

That's the trouble with föhns – they start out well and then they go downhill, literally. They're caused when cold, wet air is pushed up one side of a mountain range and then down the other, heating up and drying out along the way. Said to bring on Föhnkrankheit (or "Föhnsickness") – malaise, headaches, allergies, nausea, depression, anxiety – they can make blood clot abnormally and they change operating

room schedules.

Föhns carry a lot of positive ions, and positive ions make people, well, unhappy. Föhns are even factored into verdicts in some Swiss criminal courts. When they blow, suicide and accident rates spike. The *Los Angeles Times* has been known to keep a front-page box score of Santa Ana traffic deaths.

This year's Santa Anas were major. In October, they fed wildfires that destroyed almost 200,000 hectares and more than 2,000 homes, displacing nearly 1 million people. It was this, the "bad wind," that Joan Didion was thinking about when she wrote that "the wind shows us how close to the edge we are."

Sure, she might have been talking about our own les suetes here in Cape Breton, the sudden gales that blow unsuspecting hikers to cliff edges and within an inch of their lives. Named after the French for southeast – sud est – these southeasterlies rip down from the Inverness highlands at speeds of 150 km/h. You can't stand up in les suetes; you can only get down on your knees, pray and crawl away.

But Cape Bretoners are used to doing that anyway. Nova Scotia's blow this fall was our second wind catastrophe in four years. (The hurricane season was milder in 2007 – elsewhere.)

And yes, our winter will outdo anyone's. Down East, it's hard not to feel doomed. Since we're doomed by so many things, though, what's a little wind?

But please, all the same, hold the föhn.