

Warning: extreme weather ahead

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

- What's the weather like today? Is it typical for this time of year?
- How would you describe a typical British summer? Quickly read paragraphs one and two and compare your answer with the information there.

2 Behind the headline

Answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think the author has written *extreme weather ahead* as part of the headline?
2. Explain this play on words: *global weirding* (subtitle)

3 Key words

Write the key words from the article next to the definitions below.

devastated	brink	bankruptcy	drought zone
scorched	roller coaster	unprecedented	
veering	immune	peaked	sizzling

1. an area that has experienced a long period of time with little or no rain and where crops have died

2. a situation in which there are many big and sudden changes; likened to a fairground ride

3. never having happened or existed before _____
4. burnt on the surface due to lack of water and extreme heat _____
5. seriously damaged or completely destroyed _____
6. reached the highest amount or level, before becoming lower _____
7. the point in time when something very bad or very good is about to happen

8. a situation in which a person has to admit that that they have no money and cannot pay what they owe

9. suddenly moving in a different direction; going from one extreme to the other

10. very hot; like food cooking in hot oil _____
11. not influenced or affected by something _____

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Tornados, wildfires, droughts and floods were once seen as freak conditions. But the environmental disasters now striking the world are shocking signs of 'global weirding'.

James Robinson

7 July, 2011

- 1 Drought zones have been declared across much of England and Wales, yet Scotland has just registered its wettest-ever May. The warmest British spring in 100 years followed one of the coldest UK winters in 300 years. June in London has been colder than March. February was warm on Snowdon, the highest mountain in Wales, but in June it snowed there.
- 2 Welcome to the climate roller coaster, or what is being coined the "new normal" of weather. What was, until quite recently, predictable, temperate, mild and equable British weather, guaranteed to be warm and wet, now sees the seasons reversed and temperature and rainfall records broken almost every year. When Kent, in southern England, receives as much rain (four millimetres) in May as Timbuktu, Manchester has more sunshine than Marbella, and soils in southern England are drier than those in Egypt, something is happening.
- 3 Government scientists at the centre for hydrology and ecology are openly using words like "remarkable", "unprecedented" and "shocking" to describe the recent physical state of Britain, but this is nothing compared to what has been taking place elsewhere.
- 4 In 2010, more than two million square kilometres of eastern Europe and Russia scorched. An extra 50,000 people died as temperatures stayed more than 6°C above normal for many weeks, crops were devastated and hundreds of giant wildfires broke out. The price of wheat and other foods rose as two thirds of the continent experienced its hottest summer in around 500 years.
- 5 In 2011, it's western Europe's turn for a mega-heatwave, with 16 countries, including France, Switzerland and Germany, experiencing extreme dryness. The blame is being put on El Niño and La Niña, naturally occurring but poorly understood events that follow heating and cooling of the Pacific Ocean near the equator, bringing floods and droughts.
- 6 Vast areas of Europe have received less than half the rainfall they would normally get in March, April and May; temperatures have been off the scale for the time of year. But for real extremes in 2011, look to Australia, China and the southern US.
- 7 In Queensland, Australia, an area the size of Germany and France was flooded in December and January in what was called the country's "worst natural disaster". It cost the economy up to \$32 billion, devastated livelihoods and is still being cleaned up.
- 8 In China, a "once-in-a-100-years" drought in southern and central regions has dried up hundreds of reservoirs, rivers and water courses, and evaporated drinking supplies. The government responded with a massive rain-making operation, firing thousands of rockets to "seed" clouds with silver iodide and other chemicals. It may have worked: the heavens opened and a record 30 centimetres of rain fell in some places in 24 hours, floods and mudslides killed 94 people, and tens of thousands of people lost their homes.
- 9 Meanwhile, north America's most deadly and destructive tornado season ever saw 600 "twisters" in April alone, and 138 people killed in Joplin, Missouri, by a mile-wide whirlwind. Arizonans were this week fighting some of the largest wildfires they have known, and the greatest flood in recorded US history is occurring along sections of the Missouri river.
- 10 The impacts of extreme weather are greater in poorer countries. In Mexico, the temperature peaked at 48.8°C in April, the warmest anywhere in the world that month, and nearly half the country is now affected by drought. There have already been 9,000 wildfires, and the biggest farm union says that more than 3.5 million

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farmers are on the brink of bankruptcy because they cannot feed their cattle or grow crops.

- 11 Wherever you look, the climate appears to be in overdrive, with stronger weather patterns gripping large areas for longer and events veering between extremes. Last year, according to US meteorologist Jeff Masters, who co-founded leading climate tracker website Weather Underground, seventeen countries experienced record temperatures. Colombia, Peru, Cuba, Kenya, Somalia and many other countries have all registered far more or less rainfall or major heatwaves in the past few years, he says. Temperatures in Bangladesh have been near record highs; Kuwait has seen temperatures in excess of 50°C and Rajasthan in India 49.6°C, while parts of Canada, including Toronto, have been sizzling at a record 33°C.
- 12 Rich countries may be more or less immune in the short term because the global trading system guarantees food, and access to electricity allows air conditioning, but in parts of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, millions of people this year have little or no food left after successive poor rainy seasons.
- 13 Sceptics argue that there have always been droughts and floods, freak weather, heatwaves

and temperature extremes, but what concerns most climate scientists and observers is that the extreme weather events are occurring more frequently, their intensity is growing and the trends all suggest long-term change as greenhouse gases steadily build in the atmosphere.

- 14 Killer droughts and heatwaves, deeper snowfalls, more widespread floods, heavier rains and temperature extremes are now the “new normal”. Analysis of natural disasters in 140 countries shows that climate is becoming more extreme.
- 15 “It is abundantly clear that weather-related disasters have been increasing in some of the world’s poorest countries,” says Steve Jennings, the author of a report for Oxfam.
- 16 “I think that ‘global weirding’ is the best way to describe what we’re seeing. We are used to certain conditions and there’s a lot going on these days that is not what we’re used to, that is outside our current frame of reference,” says climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe of Texas Tech University.

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4 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. The whole of Britain is currently suffering from drought conditions.
2. In the past, British weather was rather predictable.
3. In May 2011, parts of southern England received the same amount of rain as parts of Africa.
4. In the summer of 2010, people in Russia set fire to their ruined crops.
5. The biggest temperature extremes can be seen in eastern Europe.
6. The Chinese shot rockets into clouds to try to make rain.
7. The rockets were a complete failure as no rain fell afterwards.
8. In the US, there were more tornadoes than usual in 2011.
9. Queensland, Australia was the hottest place in the world in April 2011.
10. Rich countries suffer more from adverse weather conditions than developing countries do.
11. Despite the large number of catastrophes, there is no evidence that our climate has become more extreme.
12. We find the new weather conditions strange because we are not used to them.

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5 Describing events

a. Match the noun phrases and the past tense verbs so that they describe events mentioned in the article.

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. drought zones | a. broke out |
| 2. people | b. rose |
| 3. crops | c. have been declared |
| 4. wildfires | d. opened |
| 5. prices | e. were devastated |
| 6. the heavens | f. died |

b. What caused these events?

6 Discussion

- Have you noticed or experienced 'global weirding' in the past few years? Do you believe it exists?
- Have the weather patterns changed since you were a child?

7 Webquest

- Go to the BBC website and look at the forecast for your area: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/>
Read the weather news and the section about climate change. Find out if any weather warnings have been issued.
- Read about your country's weather in the country guides: http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/hi/country_guides. Does this describe the weather you have had recently?

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KEY

2 Behind the headline

1. *Extreme weather ahead* is a typical phrase you would expect to hear in a weather forecast.
2. *Global weirding* is a combination of *global warming* and *weird* (*strange and unusual*), implying that because of global warming our weather has become weird.

3 Key words

1. drought zone
2. roller coaster
3. unprecedented
4. scorched
5. devastated
6. peaked
7. brink
8. bankruptcy
9. veering
10. sizzling
11. immune

4 Comprehension check

1. F – Much of Britain is currently suffering from drought conditions.
2. T
3. T
4. F – In the summer of 2010, Russian crops were ruined by the extreme heat.
5. F – The biggest temperature extremes can be seen in Australia, China and the southern US.
6. T
7. F – The rockets may have worked as a record 30 centimetres of rain fell in some places in 24 hours.
8. T
9. F – Mexico was the hottest place in the world in April 2011.
10. F – Rich countries suffer less from adverse weather conditions than developing countries do.
11. F – There is evidence that our climate has become more extreme.
12. T

5 Describing events

1. c. Cause: lack of rain
2. f. Cause: the unusually hot temperatures in Russia and eastern Europe in 2010
3. e. Cause: the unusually hot temperatures in Russia and eastern Europe in 2010
4. a. Cause: the unusually hot temperatures in Russia and eastern Europe in 2010
5. b. Cause: the unusually hot temperatures in Russia and eastern Europe in 2010
6. d. Cause: China's attempt to make rain by 'seeding' clouds