

Port Isaac Bay in a North Westerly gale

Photo by Paul Glendell

# Weather in Cornwall

## Fact or Folklore?

Article by Denise Tillinghast

**Much of Cornwall's economy is directly affected by the weather, from long standing traditions of farming, fishing and seafaring to the increasing dependence on a wide range of tourism provision.**

In these times of extreme weather events there are no guarantees wherever you are in the world. However, patterns have emerged over the years which give us a general rule of the thumb guide to various climates. Weather systems generally move from west to east. Cornwall is temperate and being bordered on three sides by sea has a strong maritime influence with many microclimates determined by location.

### TEMPERATURE AND SUNSHINE

The Gulf Stream has a warming influence resulting in relatively mild winters and comfortable summers with few extreme highs and lows. Spring and autumn are generally mild and pleasant. Annual average temperature is around 11C, similar to that of the surrounding seas compared to 7C in the Shetlands. Further inland can be cooler on higher ground. February is usually the coldest month in Cornwall with July and August the warmest.

High pressure extending from the Azores often has a favourable effect on sunshine in coastal Cornwall during the summer. Average annual coastal sunshine totals can be around 1600 hours compared to 1100 hours on the Shetlands with the south coast being slightly more favourable than the north. Inland, averages are between 1400 and 1600 hours. June can be the sunniest month with December being the least sunny.

### WIND, RAIN AND SNOW

Cornwall is one of the more exposed parts of the UK and has wind speeds second only to parts of Scotland. Gusts and speeds are strongest and most frequent in winter, mainly coming from between the south and northwest directions.

Rain is the result of the lifting and cooling of water in the air. Atlantic depressions are the main cause of autumn and winter rain whereas summer showers and thunderstorms are triggered by convection currents from surface heating of the land by the sun. Rainfall is often highest in early autumn due to high sea temperatures increasing air humidity. The southwest is prone to rare but prolonged heavy falls of rain.

Cornwall is one of the wetter parts of the UK and altitude greatly affects rainfall distribution. Clouds from the sea hit the coastal strip and are forced to rise over the higher ground. Here the additional cooling produces greater amounts of rain than along the coast.

As snowfall needs temperatures of 4C or less, it is limited and rarely lies around for long. It is usually confined to between November and April, slightly longer on upland areas.

### FOLKLORE

Observation of the environment was a key skill for forecasting the weather before the days of measuring instruments. Here are a few sayings that have some reliability and scientific foundation.

*"Red sky at night shepherd's delight,  
Red sky in the morning shepherd's warning."*

The low sun passes through dust particles in the atmosphere scattering blue light rays leaving red light.

Red in the evening means high pressure is moving in from the west, indicating fair weather. In the morning the pressure has moved eastwards predicting rain from the west.

*"Mackerel sky and mare's tails make tall ships carry low sails."*

These are the altocumulus and cirrus cloud types that form before a storm.

*"A ring around the sun or moon means rain or snow is coming soon."*

Caused by light refracting through ice crystals in high clouds that may mean wet weather approaching.

*"When the wind is blowing in from the North,  
No fisherman should set forth."*

*When the wind is blowing from the east*

*'Tis not fit for man nor beast.*

*When the wind is blowing in the South*

*It brings the food over the fish's mouth.*

*When the wind is blowing in the West,*

*That is when the fishing's best!"*

These are good indicators of the conditions brought in from each direction in an area of low pressure. i.e.

**North** = Cold and blustery,

**East** = warm, dry and dusty in summer and very cold in winter

**South** = warm winds and pleasant temperatures

**West** = fair and clear for some time

*"No weather is ill, if the wind be still".*

Clear skies and calm conditions indicate high pressure and the absence of wind, clouds and precipitation. The exception being *"the calm before the storm"* when a storm is building up in the west.

*"A cow with its tail in the West  
makes the weather best,*

*A cow with its tail in the East  
makes the weather least."*

Cows stand with their backs to the wind. Westerly winds usually mean fair weather. Whereas easterly winds mean unsettled weather.

And just to finish off, a childhood rhyme that's on the tip of the tongue of many a local about Lundy Island which is often visible from north Cornwall.

*"Lundy high, sign of dry  
Lundy plain, sign of rain  
Lundy low, sign of snow."*

Many thanks to the MET Office for checking this article.

CORNISH COAST  
ADVENTURES  
Port Quin, North Cornwall.

Tel: 01208 880280

### Guided Sea Kayaking

No Surf? Well, come and join us on a 3 hour kayaking adventure along the rugged North Cornwall coast or just come and have a taster session for an hour or two.

### Coasteering

Explore the coastline up close and personal with us, swim, scramble and jump!

3 hour Kayak or Coasteering sessions

£30/person/activity  
group discounts available.

Qualified & highly experienced local guides  
[www.cornishcoastadventures.com](http://www.cornishcoastadventures.com)

