

Tornado slams dam

By Pam Sohn, Michael Stone
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The metallic snarl of the crash was still grinding in his ears when Noe Fuentes looked out his car's window and saw why the driver in front of him had slammed on the brakes.



A tornado.

"I saw it on the river," said the 22-year-old.

As rain poured down Tuesday night, Fuentes wrapped himself in a blanket and talked about the wreck on the Highway 153 bridge over Chickamauga Dam. The tornado, reported by several eyewitnesses, caused a seven-car pileup that shut down the bridge for about three hours and sent five people to the hospital, including a child, none with life-threatening injuries, police said.

After hitting the dam, the tornado, not yet confirmed by the National Weather Service, bounced across the Tennessee River and onto the northern bank, smashing through an apartment complex and a subdivision before hopping back into the clouds.

Across the river, Jim Stanley was watching the storm in his new Queen Aire Lane home in Hixson.

"I saw the funnel hit the dam, bounce up in the air and cross the lake. When it came down about 50 yards from the back of my house, I ran inside and grabbed [his wife] and the dog and we went downstairs," he said, looking at the top of his house where a large portion of the roof is missing.

"It was all over in 10 seconds," he said.



Stanley estimated 80 percent of their home was destroyed "in probably less than five seconds."

Craig Carpenter, observation program leader with the National Weather Service, said official confirmation that the funnel cloud, sighted about 6:45 p.m. Tuesday, was a tornado won't come until today.

"But we're reporting it now as a tornado touchdown at the Chickamauga Dam. We've had eyewitness reports from the emergency services there (in Chattanooga)," Carpenter said.

Just after 10 p.m., emergency officials announced the evacuation of 50 units in the Lakeshore on the Hill apartment complex, according to Bruce Garner, spokesman for the Chattanooga Fire Department. The roof and some balconies were blown off one of the buildings, he said.

Several residents there saw the tornado, too.

"I looked out the patio window and it was like 'The Wizard of Oz,'" resident Cydne Hammond said. "Debris was flying everywhere and I yelled, 'Tornado!'"

"I thought I was gonna die."

Carolyn Babcock was bringing her plants from stairwell into her second-floor apartment when the tornado passed.

"I was hanging on the railing of the staircase and I couldn't move to get to the front door," she said.

Video: Tornado hits Chickamauga Dam area

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Her husband, Al, said there was a great suction, and he couldn't get the door open to help her.

There were no injuries in the Queen Aire subdivision, where at least five homes were damaged.

Likewise, there were no injuries at the Lakeshore on the Hill complex, Garner said.

TVA Chief Operating Officer Bill McCollum Jr. said Tuesday night that the Chickamauga Dam was not damaged by the tornado, although road signs and guard rails on the bridge above the dam and along Lake Resort Drive were blown down.

Mobile homes being used for construction on the dam were destroyed, said Amy Maxwell, spokeswoman for Hamilton County Emergency Management Services.

"They're completely flattened," she said. "Debris is all over the road."

Debris on roadways, she said, is one of the main reasons Hamilton County schools are scheduled to open two hours late today. However, schools are expected to dismiss on time.

The tornado was the only one reported in Tennessee on Tuesday, although funnel clouds were seen in McMinn and Loudon counties, though, said WRCB-TV meteorologist Nick Austin.

Laura Belanger, a meteorologist at the weather service's office in Peachtree City, Ga., said there had been "on and off" reports of funnel clouds throughout North Georgia, "but no tornadoes."

She said late Tuesday that there had been no confirmed damage reports for North Georgia, but that the tornado watch would continue into

Wednesday morning.



Portions of North Georgia received between an inch and an inch and a half of rain, Belanger said.

“At this point, we haven’t had any flooding concerns because we have been so dry in October,” she said.

Sightings of tornadoes and damage to houses and power lines were common in Northeast Alabama, according to the National Weather Service. Most of the activity was centered around the town of Geraldine in southwest DeKalb County.

In Chattanooga, the total damage caused by the tornado will become more clear today, officials said. The National Weather Service is scheduled to assess the damage and determine whether it was caused by a tornado and, if so, the strength of the tornado.

High winds knocked out power to nearly 2,400 homes and businesses in the Hixson, Northgate and Lakeshore areas shortly after 6 p.m., EPB spokeswoman Danna Bailey said.

By about 11 p.m., EPB crews had restored power to about 900 of their customers, Bailey said, but some of the damage is in “more challenging terrain” that’s difficult to reach or assess at night.

Some repairs may be finished Tuesday night, and the rest will be fixed this morning, she said.

Storms began early Monday and are expected to leave the area mostly by today, Austin said.

“It’s continuing to chug off eastward,” he said.

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