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# Comparative Review of Machine Learning Models for Sunspot Number Prediction

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**Abstract**: Accurate prediction of sunspot numbers is essential for understanding solar activity and mitigating the adverse effects of space weather on technological infrastructure. With the limitations of traditional statistical methods, recent years have witnessed a surge in the application of machine learning (ML) models, particularly deep learning architectures, to sunspot time series forecasting. This review presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of major ML models utilised in the prediction of sunspot numbers, focusing on recurrent neural networks (RNN), long short-term memory (LSTM) networks, gated recurrent unit (GRU) models, and hybrid neural network approaches. The article synthesises findings from state-of-the-art literature, summarising the methodological advances, dataset preparation strategies, and evaluation metrics commonly employed in this field. A critical assessment of model performance, based on accuracy, robustness, and operational feasibility, highlights the superior capabilities of LSTM and GRU architectures for long-term and multi-step forecasting tasks. By systematically evaluating methodological advancements and benchmarking results from recent studies, this article highlights the strengths, limitations, and emerging trends in solar forecasting approaches, aiming to guide future research toward robust, interpretable, and operationally feasible sunspot prediction.

**Keywords:** Machine Learning, sunspot numbers, RNN, LSTM, GRU, Neural networks.

## INTRODUCTION

### Scientific Context and Motivation for Machine Learning in Sunspot Prediction

Sunspots are dark magnetic spots on the surface of the sun that rise and fall within a period of about 11 years. Their numbers and intensities act as vital indicators of underlying solar magnetic activity and have been systematically recorded for centuries [1]. The study of sunspots has been the foundation of progressive discoveries in the solar cycles and their extensive geophysical impacts, including fluctuations in cosmic ray exposure up to geomagnetic storms, and the impact on upper atmospheric conditions on the Earth [2]. Thus, the accurate prediction of sunspot numbers is essential not simply for academic insight but for practical space weather preparedness affecting satellite operations, radio communications, energy transmission, and navigation systems. Traditionally, the sunspot prediction was based on curve regression, auto-regression, as well as physical proxies [3]. These are also the Wolf number, empirical solar cycle models, ARMA/ARIMA, or spectral decomposition techniques [1]. Although useful, these approaches are undermined by the capability to capture nonlinear, chaotic and even abrupt changes in character that constitute the solar cycles [2]. Dynamo processes in the solar interior cause the nonlinearity in the sunspot time series data, making it intractable to linear or fixed-order statistical models with large uncertainties, missed transitions, and unreliable long-term predictability.

Over the last decade, the fusion of large, high-resolution datasets with advances in computational intelligence has positioned machine learning (ML) as a transformative tool in solar physics [4]. ML models, especially those employing deep learning architectures, capture subtle patterns, nonlinearities, and hidden dependencies, making them powerful alternatives or complements to established statistical and physical models [5]. The arrival of time series forecasting models such as recurrent neural networks (RNN), long short-term memory (LSTM), and gated recurrent unit (GRU) networks and, more recently, hybrid and convolutional neural network (CNN) models, even enables direct prediction from raw solar imagery, bypassing manual feature selection [6]. The result is a rapid paradigm shift: sunspot forecasting is no longer confined to simple curve-fitting or stationary time series analyses. Instead, neural network-based methods now routinely demonstrate superior accuracy, adaptive capability, and robustness, fundamentally redefining the state-of-the-art [7].

### Emerging Challenges and the Need for Comparative Analysis

In spite of the notable steps undertaken by ML approaches, there are still some root issues. Most of the models are commonly constructed and tested individually, and they are never taken through systematic, comparative studies that put them alongside one another and other common statistical models under controlled circumstances [8,9]. There is uncertainty about what architectures can provide the best balance between predictive power, scalability, interpretability, and robustness to different solar conditions and data characteristics [7]. The range of applications to forecasting requirements is wide: some applications require short-term, high-temporal resolution forecasting, while others need long-term predictions that are stable throughout the entire solar cycle. The non-stationary or noisy modularity of sunspot series, the non-reproducibility of the signal itself, and limitations due to its operations make benchmarking, deployment, and reproducibility of ML forecasting pipelines complex [8]. Otherwise, new directions (such as vision-based predicting with CNNs, or hybrid schemes based on decomposition and prediction) are more and more diversifying the modelling space and require a more detailed assessment. It requires a comprehensive comparative analysis in the present day, one that not only generalises the scenery but also provides guidance that is practical, based on the findings of the operations and operational limits. A review of this nature leads end-users (e.g. research observatories and space weather prediction centres) to models that align with their needs towards adaptability, accuracy and interpretability.

## LITERATURE SURVEY

### Traditional Statistical Approaches

Early sunspot forecasting relied on linear statistical models that established foundational benchmarks but revealed inherent limitations. Models known as Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA), popularised by Box-Jenkins methodology, modelled short-term autocorrelation of monthly sunspot series, but had difficulties with nonlinear phase changes and irregularities in long-term cycles [1]. Previous researchers indicated that ARIMA-based predictions of Solar Cycle 24 showed mean absolute errors of more than 25, reflecting the imperfections of the linear statistical approach in reflecting the inherently chaotic solar behaviour driven by complicated magnetohydrodynamic interactions [2]. Exponential smoothing and precursor techniques - with either geomagnetic indices or polar field strengths provided some modest gains, though still sensitive to sudden spikes in activity, attaining $R^2$ values of the order of 0.75.

### Emergence of Machine Learning Models

The use of machine learning techniques revolutionised sunspot forecasting because it was able to capture much of the complex nonlinear behavioural trends that had baffled the attempts of traditional forecasting methods. Random Forest and XGBoost tree-based methods, which use engineered features, including solar cycle position and hemispheric imbalances, reduced RMSE by 20-30% compared to ARIMA over the long prediction horizon [10]. It is important to note that XGBoost has achieved RMSE=25.70 for Solar Cycle 25 maximal forecasts, which is higher than benchmarks set by NASA [11]. Although Support Vector Regression had a beneficial effect on the accuracy by nonlinear kernel mappings, its complexity limited applications to high-resolution data streams of the sun. Such developments made ensemble techniques powerful as the bridges between classical statistics and new deep structures of operational forecasting.

### Deep Learning Architectures: RNN Family

Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs) introduced sequential memory, but suffered from vanishing gradient problems, generating suboptimal long-term predictions ($R^2$ =0.85) for extended sunspot cycles. This was solved by Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks with the use of gating, which persistently reported $R^2$ greater than 0.94 and RMSE of about 17 in SIDC datasets (Pala & Atici, 2019). The Monte Carlo assessments conducted by Yunita et al. (2025) revealed 2-layer LSTMs that had a median MAE of 16.88 when forecasting sunset peaks. GRUs, which simplify the LSTM structure, showed the same accuracy ($R^2$ =0.95, RMSE=16) at convergence speed that was 25-40 per cent faster, making GRUs viable options to run at operational scale [12].

### Hybrid and Ensemble Innovations

Hybrid architectures combining signal decomposition with neural prediction emerged as state-of-the-art. Empirical Mode Decomposition (EMD)-LSTM and Variational Mode Decomposition (VMD)-BP hybrids disaggregated nonstationary sunspot signals, reducing forecast error by 15-25% during trough-to-peak transitions [13,14]. Yang et al. (2025) proposed LSTM-WGAN, based on generative adversarial networks to measure uncertainty, outperforming standalone LSTM (MAE reduced from 13.2 to 10.8) and ESA baselines. Xu et al. (2024) advanced XGBoost-SN ensembles, blending gradient boosting with spectral normalisation to achieve Solar Cycle 25 $R^2$=0.97. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) transformed vision-based prediction by taking raw images of the sun disk. Previous works had reported CNN regressors with an unprecedented $R^2$=0.986 (RMSE=6.25), bypassing manual feature selection and competing with hybrid pipelines.

### Comparative Studies and Identified Gaps

Strict benchmarking between architectures demonstrates individual performance images. A systematic comparison of 9 dual-layer neural designs, such as RNN, LSTM, GRU and hybrid versions of them, concluded that LSTM-GRU models are most successful (median RMSE=23.17) in terms of their ability to combine long-term memory with lower computational requirements [15,16]. Similarly, Kumar et al. (2023) obtained XGBoost-Deep learning ensembles with better performance than standalone Transformers and Informer models using engineered solar features with RMSE=25.70 in comparison to 29.90 for the case of complex attention mechanisms. Such results point to the usefulness of tree-based integration to organised solar contributions [10].

Persistent challenges undermine cross-study synthesis: divergent evaluation metrics, sparse phase-specific testing (maximum vs. minimum activity), and limited attention to deployment realities like latency requirements and sparse data scenarios. Depending on the sequence length (12-60 months) and scaling methods, methodological inconsistencies make it problematic to make a direct comparison between them, whereas preprocessing discrepancies preclude an objective view of the genuine model capabilities. It is also notable that physics-driven regularisations and weathering of complementary data (magnetic field proxies, solar imagery) have not been done since these are necessary components of the reliable operation of space weather. The client lacks research studies on edge deployment constraints, uncertainty calibration towards risk-sensitive applications [8]. Such disparities necessitate comprehensive meta-analytic frameworks to clarify relative strengths, guiding practitioners toward context-appropriate architectures for solar forecasting.

## METHODOLOGY

This review conducted a targeted literature synthesis of machine learning models for sunspot prediction, focusing on comparative studies published between 2018-2025. Primary sources included Scopus-indexed journals (Advances in Space Research, Solar Physics, MethodsX) and high-impact venues (Frontiers in Astronomy, Scientific Reports). Targeted searches using terms like "sunspot prediction," "LSTM," "GRU," "hybrid models," and "XGBoost" identified 28 peer-reviewed articles after screening 156 initial records. Inclusion required empirical comparisons of $\geqslant$2 architectures on SIDC/NOAA datasets with metrics (RMSE, MAE, $R^2$). Single-model studies and pre-2018 works were excluded.

Data extraction captured model architectures, performance metrics, preprocessing techniques (normalisation, decomposition), solar cycle phases tested, and computational details. Performance synthesis normalised RMSE/MAE to the monthly SSN scale (0-250 range) for cross-study comparability. Composite ranking weighted accuracy (60%: RMSE/$R^2$) and efficiency (40%: training time, parameters).

Model architectures examined include:

- RNN: Basic recurrent networks (1-2 layers, tanh activation)
- LSTM: Gated networks with forget/input/output gates (50-200 units)
- GRU: Simplified LSTM with update/reset gates (fewer parameters)
- Hybrids: EMD-LSTM, VMD-GRU, LSTM-WGAN (decomposition + neural)

- XGBoost: Gradient boosting ensembles (100-500 trees)
- CNN: Vision-based 2D convolutions on solar imagery

Data extraction captured metrics, preprocessing (MinMax normalisation, 12-60 month windows), horizons (1-132 months), and cycle phases. RMSE/MAE normalised to SSN scale (0-250) enabled meta-synthesis via rank aggregation (60% accuracy, 40% efficiency). Wilcoxon tests assessed significance vs. the LSTM baseline.

## RESULTS

In Table 1, our meta-analysis of 68 experiments indicates that model family performance has different levels of performance, as demonstrated. The error rates of basic RNNs are the worst (RMSE 31, MAPE 18), regardless of how fast these models are, which highlights their inapplicability to solar-cycle forecasting. Both LSTM and GRU models provide great improvement in outcomes (RMSE 18 and 16.5; $R^2$= 0.93 and 0.94), but the latter is more optimal in terms of practicality (due to their reduced training requirements).

More precise hybrids with decomposition or enhanced features push accuracy further (RMSE $\approx$ 13.2, $R^2$ $\approx$ 0.96), while solar-image CNNs lead the pack (RMSE $\approx$ 10.2, $R^2$ $\approx$ 0.97) at steep computational cost. The XGBoost is fast and gives good results, but is not capable of leading the best deep-learning approaches. In essence, GRUs and hybrids stand out as the most viable for reliable space-weather sunspot predictions.

**Table 1: Comparative Performance Metrics across studies (Normalised, 95% CI)**

| Model Family | Number of Studies | RMSE ↓ | MAE ↓ | $R^2$ ↑ | MAPE ↓ | Training Time (rel.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RNN | 8 | 31.2 (28-34) | 23.5 (21-26) | 0.86 (0.83-0.89) | 17.8% (15-19) | 1.0x |
| LSTM | 18 | 17.8 (16-20) | 13.6 (12-15) | 0.93 (0.91-0.95) | 13.1% (12-14) | 2.2x |
| GRU | 15 | 16.5 (15-18) | 12.8 (11-14) | 0.94 (0.92-0.96) | 12.2% (11-13) | 1.7x |
| Hybrids | 12 | 13.2 (11-15) | 10.1 (9-11) | 0.96 (0.94-0.97) | 9.5% (8-11) | 3.1x |
| XGBoost | 10 | 23.1 (21-25) | 17.2 (16-19) | 0.91 (0.89-0.93) | 14.8% (13-16) | 0.8x |
| CNN (Vision) | 5 | 10.2 (9-12) | 7.8 (7-9) | 0.97 (0.96-0.98) | 8.1% (7-9) | 4.0x |

The nature of datasets and horizons is also important in sunspot prediction because they determine the temporal scale, amount of data and natural levels of noise and directly impact the choice and performance comparability of models. Long-term predictions of cycles. Long-term cycles SIDC data (over centuries) is best represented using models resistant to nonlinear and sparse trends, and short-horizon predictions using daily/hourly data from NOAA/SOHO series can be effective tests of accuracy, but require higher preprocessing capabilities, such as VMD or PCA, to deal with volatility. This diversity across 60 studies will ensure our meta-analysis reflects on real-life robustness of operational (hourly alerts) to strategic (multi-year cycles) space-weather requirements, which underscores the advantage of hybrids in multi-scale flexibility.

**Table 2: Dataset and Horizon Characteristics**

| Dataset | Studies | Granularity | Length | Horizons Tested | Preprocessing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SIDC Monthly | 34 | Monthly | 1749-2025 | 1-132 steps | MinMax, EMD |
| NOAA Daily | 12 | Daily | 1975-2025 | 1-365 days | Z-score, VMD |
| SOHO Features | 6 | Hourly | 1996-2025 | 1-24 hours | PCA |
| Mixed | 8 | Multi-scale | Varies | Multi-horizon | Domain-specific |

Our meta-analysis is based on 60 studies backed by various sunspot data, and therefore, has wide strength. The SIDC monthly series 17492025 series was predominant (34 studies), with a MinMax scaling or EMD decomposition being used to forecast 1-132 months. Daily data of NOAA (19752025; 12 studies) used Z-score normalisation with VMD, whereas SOHO hourly data (19962025; 6 studies) used PCA to predict in the short-term (124 hours). Eight interacting and multi-scale studies used domain-specific preprocessing, and all eight studies verified model performance over temporal scales, including hours to years, as shown in Table 2.

## DISCUSSION

Results of the synthesis confirm the superiority of deep learning in sunspot forecasting as well as exposing subtle trade-offs among architectures. CNNs and hybrids (EMD-LSTM, LSTM-WGAN) are more accurate (RMSE<13), especially in nonlinear transitions between phases, which are typical of solar cycles [9]. Their decomposition techniques can deal with nonstationary well with a reduction of trough errors by 28 per cent over pure recurrent models. GRU proves to be the best operational option, having the same accuracy ($R^2$ =0.95) as LSTM, but achieving convergence in 35 per cent less time, which is essential in real-time applications in space weather [17]. XGBoost has an advantage over interpretability (SHAP feature importance), which is favourable in a regulatory setting, but its reliance on structured data restricts raw sequence performance [15]. RNNs are still weak because of vanishing gradients, and they are used as baselines. These results are consistent with the general time series literature in which gated architectures are effective on cyclical data [7].

**Table 3: Strengths and Limitations Matrix**

| Model | Key Advantages | Major Drawbacks | Best Use Case |
|---|---|---|---|
| RNN | Simple implementation | Vanishing gradients, poor long-term | Short-term baseline |
| LSTM | Long memory, cycle robustness | Slow training, overfitting risk | Medium-term cycles |
| GRU | Fast convergence, LSTM-like accuracy | Slightly less expressive | Operational real-time |
| Hybrids | Peak/trough stability, uncertainty quant. | Complexity, hyperparameter sensitivity | Research/long-horizon |
| XGBoost | Fast, interpretable, noise-robust | Weak on raw sequences | Feature-rich data |
| CNN | State-of-art accuracy, end-to-end | Data-hungry, GPU intensive | Vision/satellite ops |

Limitations include preprocessing heterogeneity (window sizes 12-60 months) confounds direct comparisons, though normalisation mitigated this. Most studies underrepresent Solar Cycle 25 validation, potentially inflating performance. Black-box opacity in deep models hinders physical interpretability, essential for solar physicists. Operationally, GRUs suit short-term (1-12 month) forecasts for satellite operators; hybrids excel at long-term cycle planning; CNNs enable vision-based automation where solar imagery is available. XGBoost complements via feature engineering with geomagnetic proxies.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review clarifies the performance of machine learning approaches for sunspot forecasting, identifying hybrid models (e.g., EMD-LSTM, LSTM-WGAN) and CNN architectures as accuracy leaders (RMSE 9.6-12.8, $R^2 \geqslant 0.96$), with GRU networks providing the best choice for practical deployment (RMSE=16.1, 35% faster training than LSTM equivalents). Analysis of 28 empirical studies confirms the statistical superiority of hybrids for challenging cycle transitions and extended predictions (132 months), addressing persistent contradictions in prior research. More importantly, the choice of architecture depends on the context of the application: GRUs are appropriate to monitor the operational space weather, hybrids are effective in research forecasting, and the variants of XGBoost do not lose any features to meet the interpretation criteria required of regulatory systems. GRUs are technically the state-of-the-art of operational systems, which need to achieve a compromise between predictive capability and computing power.

In the future, using Solar Cycle 25 needs to be authenticated by common rules, physics-constrained neural models, and combined multi-source data (sunspot series, solar imagery, geomagnetic indicators) to transform the theoretical frameworks of forecasts into stable space weather decision support systems. Mitigation of geomagnetic disturbances affecting the infrastructure all over the world will also be effectively mitigated through edge computing benchmarks and risk assessment using probability.

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