

Freezing would signal a warming trend in Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

If things keep going like this, those who talk about the winter of 1952 may have competition when it comes to bragging. That winter, the onslaught of snow that brought the white stuff to the second story of homes and businesses in Lake Tahoe didn't start until Jan. 11.

As the calendar flips to a new page tomorrow, with it goes a November for the record books.

The overnight low for Nov. 28 was minus 8 degrees in South Lake Tahoe. It broke the record of minus 6 degrees set in 1975. Records were also set that night in Tahoe City, Truckee, Portola, Markleeville, Bridgeport and Mammoth.



Icicles don't have a chance to melt with highs in the 30s.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

When it comes to snow totals, more records. Daggett Pass (aka the top of Kingsbury Grade at 7,334 feet) in Stateline recorded 57 inches of snow for November. November 1989 had 22

inches – now the second snowiest November on record, though totals have only been kept at that location since the winter of 1988-89.

The National Weather Service in Reno just started keeping snow totals for South Lake Tahoe last winter. More than 50 inches have been recorded this month at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Tahoe City has come in with 70.5 inches this November and still had 32 inches at the dam on Monday.

“It’s definitely in the top 5 to 10 percent of snowiest Novembers ever,” Dawn Fishler, meteorologist with the Weather Service in Reno, said of the region. “We just got in a good pattern.”

What’s next?

How this section of the Sierra Nevada sits the weather phenomena known as La Nina and El Nino don’t mean a lot. This is because the region is on the cusp of those systems. So, while the Bay Area is projected to have a dry, cold winter because of La Nina, the same cannot be predicted for Lake Tahoe.

Only four times in recorded history for this area has a La Nina followed a strong El Nino, according to Fishler. Two were dry, two were extremely wet – so history is not helping foretell the future of this winter.

To complicate matters for forecasters “the models have been all over the place,” Fishler said.

The three main long-range models are run four times a day.

“Those are changing every single run,” Fishler said. That’s not normal.

It points to how four days ago the storm forecast for midweek looked strong, but by Monday the chance of snow for Wednesday

had dwindled to 20 to 30 percent.

Those models are pointing to a wet weekend with snow down to 5,000 feet. But Fishler said with the lack of confidence in the models she wasn't about to commit to that forecast this many days in advance.

Temperatures should be rising, even though it was only supposed to be about 4 degrees as people woke up in the basin this morning. The overnight lows should warm up to be in the 20s, with daytime highs in the 40s for the week. By the weekend it's back to the teens overnight and highs in the 30s.

Water content is of importance with snowfall because that's what fills the reservoirs downstream. In Tahoe City every 11 inches of snow produced 1 inch of liquid; it was a 16:1 ratio in South Lake Tahoe and 20:1 at Daggett Summit.

What it all means

For most ski resorts, this is the earliest opening since 2004-05 when runs were open in October.

"It's radically awesome," is how Kirstin Cattell of Sierra-at-Tahoe described the conditions. "I was in the trees all week. You don't usually get in the trees opening weekend. You have to use your brain. That lump is probably a rock."

She described the snow as "light and dry."

So much snow has dumped at Sierra that gates one and two of Huckleberry Canyon are open.

On the North Shore, Alpine was reporting this as the second snowiest November in the resort's history – and that was before Mother Nature unleashed more snow Saturday.

Mt. Rose is reporting the shallowest base of Tahoe area resorts – 31 to 55 inches.

Still to open are Tahoe Donner Downhill and Homewood Mountain Resort – Dec. 10; Diamond Peak – Dec. 16; and Granlibakken (ski hill) – Dec. 17.

Sierra Avalanche Center is issuing a moderate warning for conditions as of Nov. 29.

Andy Chapman with the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association said this was the strongest Thanksgiving weekend in the last decade, maybe the last 15 years, in terms of visitors.

“We haven’t had this type of product available in quite some time,” Chapman said of the snow. “To me and many I talked to it was almost like the Christmas period, it was that busy.”

The North Shore is hoping to ride the tourism momentum that started last winter. The January-March 2010 hotel tax dollars collected in Placer County were the second highest for that quarter since the county has charged the fee.

Chapman believes it’s the ability to attract the drive-up market from the Bay Area and Sacramento as well as the short fly market that is boding well for businesses.

The South Shore also noticed the phone starting to ring as the snow started to fly. With Heavenly being on wind hold several days, it was fortuitous that Kirkwood and Sierra fired up their lifts to give people in the South Lake area options for riding.

Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, said she is hearing a buzz among skiers who are excited to be able to ski Heavenly, Sierra and Northstar this season with certain season passes because Vail Resorts bought the Truckee resort last month.

Besides ski resorts, lodging, restaurants and roads being busy with the early snowfall – the cold is keeping employees with heating businesses working around the clock.

Nixon's on the South Shore and Clark Plumbing, which operates around the lake, barely had time to chat with *Lake Tahoe News* because customers kept calling. Frozen pipes and dirty furnaces are making life miserable for some people.

TJ Stewart of Clark said, "Keep the heat on to override the outside temperature." He suggested 55 to 60 degrees as the low on a thermostat.

Another tip is to open cabinet doors when leaving for several days so heat in the house reaches the pipes.

Basic winter tips

- Shovel around the gas meter and don't let snow pile up.
- Have plenty of flashlights – with working batteries.
- Stock up on canned goods before a storm just in case that semi doesn't make it to the grocery store with a fresh supply.
- Keep a good supply of candles on hand.
- Don't use propane or camping stoves indoors.
- Four-wheel drive does not mean being able to stop as though the conditions were clear and dry.
- Don't go in the backcountry alone. Carry avalanche rescue equipment.
- Check your windshield wiper fluid.
- Carry a blanket, water, food, extra clothes, and a shovel – especially crossing a summit.

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