

1862: California's most devastating winter



Sacramento under water, circa 1862. | Photo/California Historical Society

By Mark McLaughlin, Tahoe Weekly

There's been a lot of talk about weather records being broken this winter, but it was only January's epic snowfall totals that have made it into the record books so far. In January 2017, the Central Sierra Snow Lab near Donner Pass and many Tahoe Sierra resorts set new monthly snowfall tallies ranging from 20 to 25 feet.

But the current seasonal snowfall total of about 42 feet at the CSSL means we still have a long way to go to reach Top 10 status at Donner Pass, let alone exceed the 68 feet that fell in 1938. We are, however, closing in on the wettest year in the precipitation category, currently holding at third place

behind 1982 and 1995, the first- and second-ranked water years since 1871. Remember, precipitation is rain and the water content of snow combined.

There have been plenty of weather-related issues across the West this winter, but even if this year manages to exceed the all-time precipitation record of 112 inches measured in 1982, it won't compare to 1861-62, the most devastating winter in California history. The predominant weather characteristic in 1862 was also an onslaught of powerful atmospheric rivers, but significantly more intense. The mega-flood that they caused took thousands of lives and destroyed 25 percent of the state's economy. The devastation forced California into bankruptcy.

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