

## Where's the snow? Not in Lower 48, but elsewhere

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In this photo combination, hundreds of cars are stranded on Lake Shore Drive on Feb. 2, 2011, in Chicago, left, while traffic moves along smoothly on the same stretch of Lake Shore Drive on Wednesday, Feb. 1, 2012, right. A winter blizzard of historic proportions wobbled an otherwise snow-tough Chicago on Feb. 1, 2011, stranding hundreds of drivers for up to 12 hours overnight on the city's showcase thoroughfare and giving many city schoolchildren their first ever snow day. (AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato, File)

(AP) -- Snow has been missing in action for much of the U.S. the last couple months. But it's not just snow. It's practically the season that's gone AWOL.

"What winter?" asked Mike Halpert, deputy director of the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center. For the Lower 48, January

was the third-least snowy on record, according to the Global Snow Lab at Rutgers University. Records for the amount of ground covered by snow go back to 1967.

Last year, more than half the nation was covered in snow as a Groundhog Day blizzard barreled across the country, killing 36 people and causing \$1.8 billion in damage. This year, less than a fifth of the country outside of Alaska has snow on the ground.

Bismarck, N.D., has had one-fifth its normal snow, Boston a third. Buffalo is three feet below normal for snowfall this year. Midland, Texas, has had more snow this season than Minneapolis or Chicago.

Forget snow. For much of the country there's not even a nip in the air. On Tuesday, the last day in January, all but a handful of states had temperatures in the 50s or higher. In the nation's capital, where temperatures flirted with the 70s, some cherry trees are already budding - weeks early.

For the Northeast it's one of the warmest and least snowy winters on record, with most of the region's temperatures the last couple months averaging 5 degrees warmer than normal, according to the Northeast Regional Climate Center at Cornell University.

"I am disgusted that golfers are golfing on my cross-country ski course," said New Jersey state climatologist David Robinson, director of the Global Snow Lab.

Matt Dulli, an assistant golf pro at The Golf Club at Yankee Trace in the Dayton, Ohio, suburb of Centerville, said 115 rounds were played Tuesday amid balmy temperatures that reached a high of 60 degrees.

"The first thing you hear out of people's mouths is, 'Can you believe

we're playing golf in January?' They're just ecstatic that they can get out at this time of year," Dulli said.

But there is lots of snow and dangerous cold - it's just elsewhere in the world. Valdez, Alaska, has had 328 inches of snow this season - 10 feet above average - and the state is frigid, with Fort Yukon hitting a record 66 below zero over the weekend.

Nearly 80 people have died from a vicious cold snap in Europe, and much of Asia has been blanketed with snow. January has been the ninth snowiest since 1966 for Europe and Asia, though for the entire northern hemisphere, it's been about average for snow this season.

The weather is so cold that some areas of the Black Sea have frozen near the Romanian coastline, and rare snowfalls have occurred on islands in the Adriatic Sea in Croatia. Ukraine alone has reported 43 fatalities, many of the victims homeless people found dead on streets. More than 720 other Ukrainians have been hospitalized with hypothermia and frostbite.

The reason is changes in Arctic winds that are redirecting snow and cold. Instead of dipping down low, the jet stream winds that normally bring cold and snow south got trapped up north. It's called the Arctic oscillation. Think of it as a cousin to the famous El Nino.

When the Arctic oscillation is in a positive phase, the winds spin fast in the Arctic keeping the cold north. But in the past few days, the Arctic oscillation turned negative, though not in its normal way, Halpert said. The cold jet stream dipped in Europe and Asia, but is still bottled up over North America.

That's because another weather phenomena, called the North Atlantic oscillation is playing oddball by staying positive and keeping the cold

away from the rest of North America. About 90 percent of the time, the North Atlantic and Arctic oscillations are in synch, Halpert said. But not this time, so much of the United States is escaping the winter's worst.

What's happening isn't just an inconvenience.

Trees and plants budding early may lose their chance to bloom when the inevitable deep freeze returns, said U.S. Geological Survey ecologist Jake Weltzin, who heads a national network that monitors the timing of spring for plants and animals. He said peach trees are budding in Georgia and in Oklahoma forsythia and daffodils have been out for two weeks now, adding "it's happening everywhere."

"If you think about plants and animals being kind of biologic thermometers, they are indicating a very early spring," Weltzin said. "That's a problem."

This could mean less fruit available this year, Weltzin said. In New York, it could weaken the grapes used to make wine, added Cornell University horticulturalist David W. Wolfe.

But it is getting people outside more often.

In the heart of the snow belt, Holden Arboretum saw a 32 percent jump in December attendance and a 20 percent jump in January visits. Over the two months about 4,200 people visited the site in Kirtland, Ohio, outside Cleveland, that features gardens, woodlands and trails.

Along Lake Erie near Toledo, Ohio, a ferry service that carries visitors to islands was beginning winter routes Wednesday for the first time in six years.

"We've just had a remarkable run of unusual winters in the past six years

globally," said Jeff Masters, director of meteorology at Weather Underground in Ann Arbor, Mich. "I have to say that winter hasn't really hit yet. Certainly not where I live."

**More information:** The Global Snow Lab: <http://bit.ly/wFuAtV>

National Weather Service map showing snow cover:

<http://t.co/OHIAPU1j>

Weather service map showing warm temperatures around the nation:

<http://t.co/rpNNt7Sp>

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