

Weird weather lingers in Alaska's largest city

December 19 2014, by Rachel D'oro



Peter Zug of the Nordic Ski Association of Anchorage trail maintenance crew looks up after making an adjustment to a snow gun during a snowmaking test at Kincaid Park in this Monday, Dec. 1, 2014 file photo. With just days to go until solstice Sunday (Dec. 21) signals the official start of winter, bare ground can be seen in places and temperatures have been averaging in the 30s, prompting a few hardy residents to take to the streets in T-shirts and shorts. (AP Photo/Alaska Dispatch News, Bill Roth)

A week before Christmas, Alaska's largest city should look like a postcard wonderland, and the last place you'd expect to see equipment

making snow.

"We want Santa to bring snow, soon," Terry Goodwin said as she hit a ski trail in Anchorage on Thursday near snowmaking machines churning out the white stuff.

A picturesque northern winter-scape is hardly the reality here as a spate of weird weather lingers in Anchorage, which is almost 2 feet behind the snowfall totals typical by this time. With just days to go until solstice Sunday signals the official start of winter, bare ground can be seen in places and temperatures have been averaging in the 30s, prompting a few hardy residents to take to the streets in T-shirts and shorts.

For the most part, it's even been too warm to make snow for local ski haunts because the machines would churn out slush. However, a slight dip in temperatures allowed the Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage to manufacture powder Thursday on trails at the city's Kincaid Park. That will have to do until nature provides its own supply.

"It's one of those things we have to weather through. Pardon the pun," said Craig Norman, a trail groomer for the association.

By this time of year, Anchorage normally has 30.9 inches of snowfall, according to National Weather Service meteorologist Bill Ludwig. But the city has seen 10.3 inches this season from just two measurable snowfalls, with much of that melted down to a thin layer in many places.

December has seen above normal temperatures every day so far, although Thursday's high of 26 degrees came close to the norm of 25. Wednesday's high temperature was 36 degrees. To date, the average temperatures for the month have been more than 8 degrees above normal, Ludwig said. The average low for December so far is nearly 23 degrees, compared with the normal low of 13.

A pressure system that has pushed warmer weather to the north more than usual is a factor in the extended warming spell, according to Ludwig. Coastal water temperatures near Alaska also have been between 5 and 8 degrees above normal at times this year, he said.

There is no bitter cold in the foreseeable forecast, either, with temperatures expected to be above or near normal through the end of the year, Ludwig said. There's a decent chance of snow sometime next week, but probably not the big heaping mounds that would bring out hordes of winter recreationists, including skiers like Ludwig. Others may be tackling thinly covered cross-country skiing trails, but that's not enough of a cushion for him, he said.

"I tend to fall a lot," he said. "I want more snow."

At the Hilltop Ski Area, crews also have been making snow for downhill runs, but that's not doable when temperatures are above 25 degrees, said CEO Steve Remme. One week before Christmas, only 1 1/2 of the area's four runs were open, and Remme was hoping to get more snow made for the weekend.

In the meantime, people keep calling to ask if the area is open. They won't have to do that once the real stuff falls and they have to kick their way through it to get to their cars, Remme said.

"Usually people come out in droves after that," he said.

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