

Yes, there is a Santa Claus. And no, COVID-19 won't stop him

December 24 2021, by James Anderson



In this photo provided by the North American Aerospace Defense Command, a 22 Wing member is seen showing how they track Santa on his sleigh on Christmas evening during a media preview at the Canadian Forces Base in North Bay on Dec. 9, 2021. In a Christmas Eve tradition going on its 66th year, a wildly popular program run by the U.S. and Canadian militaries is providing real-time updates on Santa's progress around the globe—and fielding calls from children who want to know St. Nick's exact whereabouts. Credit: Sable Brown/NORAD via AP

Rest assured, kids of all ages: Santa's coming this Christmas Eve, and a second holiday with COVID-19 won't stop him.

That's the word from the joint U.S.-Canadian military operation that for 66 years has been tracking Jolly Old St. Nicholas on his global mission and has assured us all—first by land line and more recently by iPhone, Android, OnStar, Facebook, YouTube and more—that he's on his way with a sleigh stuffed with toys and a welcome dose of joy.

In what's become its own wildly popular tradition, the Colorado-based North American Aerospace Defense Command provides real-time updates on Santa's progress Dec. 24, from 4 a.m. to midnight MST. NORAD's Santa Tracker lets families watch Father Christmas in 3D as he transits the South Pacific, Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

From deep inside NORAD headquarters, dozens of volunteers field an unrelenting wave of phone calls to 1-877-HI-NORAD (1-877-446-6723). They and other volunteers working off-site because of coronavirus distancing protocols will answer such questions as "When will he come to my house? What kind of cookies does he like?" said program manager and NORAD spokesman Preston Schlachter.



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Want to watch? Visit <https://www.noradsanta.org>, check out #NORADTracksSanta and [@NoradSanta](https://twitter.com/NoradSanta) on Twitter, or use the associated apps. You can also email noradtrackssanta@outlook.com for the latest.

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden also participated in tradition, answering calls to the Santa tracking service. It is a longstanding tradition for first ladies, but the president joined this year as well.

Even before Friday's takeoff, the NORAD webpage had been visited more than 3 million times, Schlachter said.

"Every household, every country is having to deal with the impact of this pandemic. Santa Claus is an icon, and he is a source of joy for a lot of people," Schlachter said.

For those worried about Santa's safety—or their own—the bearded man likely will be wearing a mask at each stop, and of course he's wearing gloves, Schlachter noted. For the technically inclined, NORAD's website offers more data on the voyage (Weight of gifts at takeoff: 60,000 tons, or 54,600 metric tons; sleigh propulsion: nine RP, or reindeer power).



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Like any good Christmas tale, the program's origin has been told for generations.

In 1955, Air Force Col. Harry Shoup—the on-duty commander one night at NORAD's predecessor, the Continental Air Defense

Command—answered a call from a child who dialed a number that was misprinted in an ad in a newspaper, thinking she was calling Santa.

Shoup "answered the call, thought it was a prank at first, but then realized what had happened and assured the child that he was Santa, and thus started the tradition that we are celebrating now 66 years later," Schlachter said.

NORAD's mission is to watch the skies above North America for any potential threats. Come early Christmas Eve, the Santa operation begins when a cluster of radar stations in northern Canada and Alaska pick up an infrared signature emanating from Rudolph's nose. NORAD's array of geostationary satellites above the Earth monitor the journey.

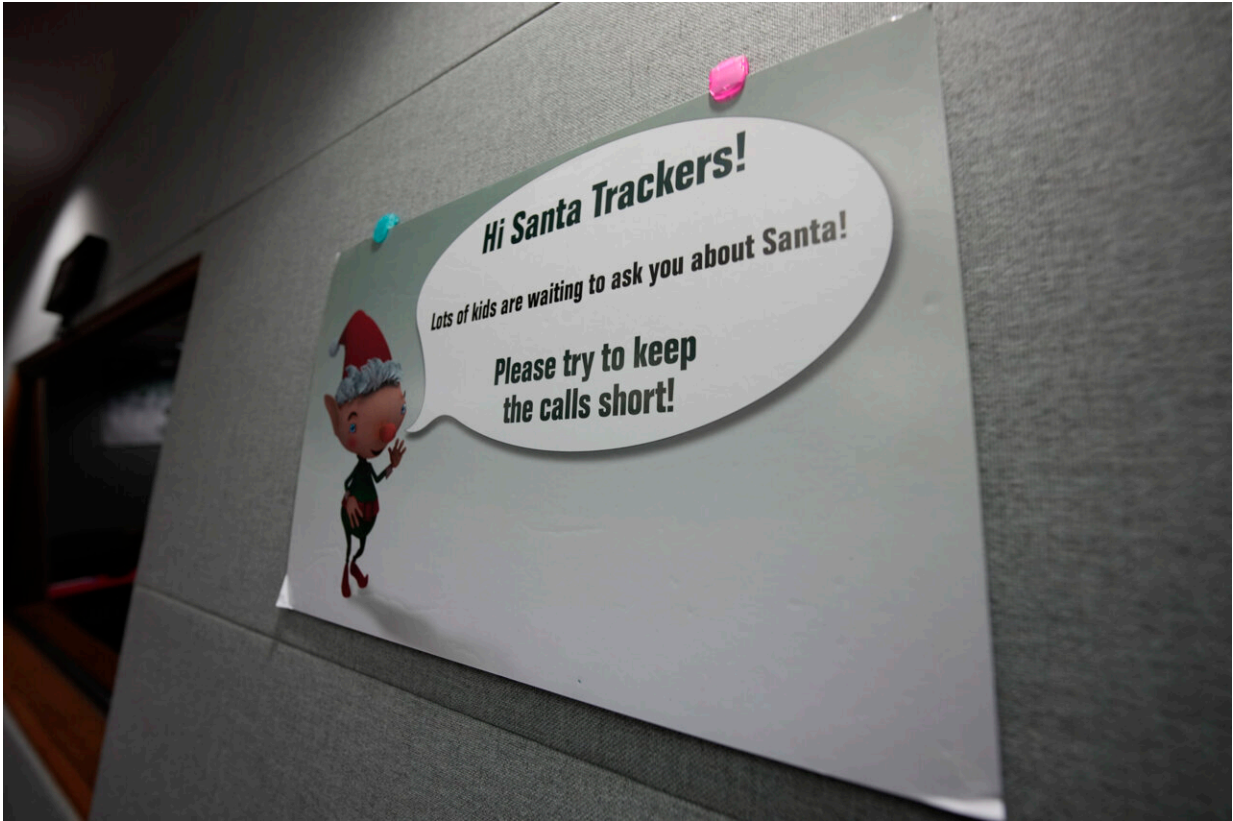


Containers of hand sanitizer stand at the ready outside one of the conference rooms that have banks of telephones set up for volunteers to field calls in the

NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center on Peterson Air Force Base
Wednesday, Dec. 22, 2021, in Colorado Springs, Colo. The tracking operation
will be open for 20 hours on Christmas Eve day to help keep an eye on the
whereabouts of Santa Claus. Credit: AP Photo/David Zalubowski



Preston Schlachter, public affair officer for NORAD, works on a laptop
computer in one of the conference rooms that have banks of telephones set up
for volunteers to field calls in the NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center on
Peterson Air Force Base Wednesday, Dec. 22, 2021, in Colorado Springs, Colo.
The tracking operation will be open for 20 hours on Christmas Eve day to help
keep an eye on the whereabouts of Santa Claus. Credit: AP Photo/David
Zalubowski



An instructional sign hangs in one of the conference rooms that have banks of telephones set up for volunteers to field calls in the NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center on Peterson Air Force Base Wednesday, Dec. 22, 2021, in Colorado Springs, Colo. The tracking operation will be open for 20 hours on Christmas Eve day to help keep an eye on the whereabouts of Santa Claus. Credit: AP Photo/David Zalubowski



Preston Schlachter, public affairs officer for NORAD, is shown in one of the conference rooms that have banks of telephones set up for volunteers to field calls in the NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center on Peterson Air Force Base Wednesday, Dec. 22, 2021, in Colorado Springs, Colo. The tracking operation will be open for 20 hours on Christmas Eve day to help keep an eye on the whereabouts of Santa Claus. Credit: AP Photo/David Zalubowski



Preston Schlachter, public affairs officer for NORAD, is silhouetted against screens in one of the conference rooms that have banks of telephones set up for volunteers to field calls in the NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center on Peterson Air Force Base Wednesday, Dec. 22, 2021, in Colorado Springs, Colo. The tracking operation will be open for 20 hours on Christmas Eve day to help keep an eye on the whereabouts of Santa Claus. Credit: AP Photo/David Zalubowski



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It's all shown on large, "unclassified" display screens in a festively decorated command post at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs. Masked volunteers sit at tables equipped with telephones, garland, miniature Christmas trees, plenty of caffeine-laden candy and coffee—and hand sanitizer.

"We Have the Watch," is NORAD's military-mission motto.

And when it comes to Santa, NORAD adds:

"Santa calls the shots. We just track him."

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