

Arctic air brings record cold to huge swath of US

7 January 2014, by Mira Oberman



Pedestrians cross the street in Detroit, Michigan, as huge areas of North America deal with record-breaking freezing weather January 6, 2014

A blast of bone-chilling cold reaching lows not seen in two decades gripped the United States early Tuesday, snarling air travel, closing schools and prompting calls for people to stay inside.

Superlatives of cold-talk abounded, even in midwestern states used to chest-high snow and bitter cold, as the National Weather Service said the deep freeze was making its way east.

Air travel was a nightmare, stranding many travelers trying to head home from year's end holidays.

More than 4,300 US flights were canceled Monday—nearly half of those in Chicago—and more than 6,500 were delayed, according to FlightAware, a flight-monitoring site.

Airline JetBlue said it was reducing operations at four airports in the bustling northeast corridor—JFK, La Guardia, Newark and Boston—until 10:00 am (0300 GMT) Tuesday.

More than a dozen deaths were blamed on the [frigid weather](#).

A shift in a weather pattern known as the "polar vortex" triggered a drastic drop in temperatures to lows not seen in two decades.

It coincided with wind chill warnings in much of the east of the country.

Comertown, Montana, recorded the lowest wind chill value so far at -63 Fahrenheit (-53 Celsius) while North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota were not much warmer.

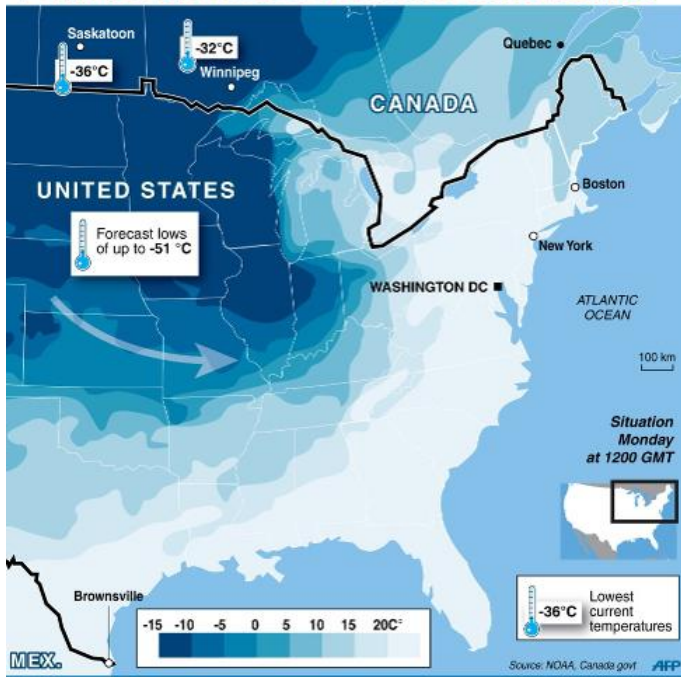
That was significantly colder than the South Pole, which recorded a wind chill reading of -29 Fahrenheit.

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, where people scoff when cities like Washington, D.C. panic and shut down with even a moderate snowfall, the newspaper The Star Tribune gave a graphic description of what happens when, for instance, the overnight temperature Monday hit 23 below Fahrenheit.

"The windchill and cold are freezing exposed flesh in five minutes," it said.

The paper said life has "slowed to a crawl across the state."

'Polar vortex' headed south into United States



Map of North America showing the extremely cold weather front headed south

whose sport utility vehicle slid off a rural Minnesota highway and fell into the Mississippi River.

Four Chicago men aged 48 to 63 died of apparent heart attacks while shoveling the snow over the weekend, the Chicago Tribune reported.

The cold snap came after two massive winter storms snarled travel, grounded thousands of flights and dumped as much as two feet (60 centimeters) of snow in the first few days of the year.

Chicago was among scores of towns and cities which told parents to keep their children at home rather than risk sending them out into winds so bitter that skin could freeze in a matter of minutes.

The governor of Minnesota canceled school across the entire state on Monday.

Illinois Governor Pat Quinn declared a state of emergency and called up the National Guard to help rescue stranded motorists as high winds whipped up blinding snow.

"It's a blistering cold spell destined for Minnesota winter weather lore," it added.

Even the typically temperate Deep South was feeling the chill with a hard freeze warning threatening crops and livestock.

Early Tuesday in Washington, DC, the temperature was a relatively mild 12 degrees Fahrenheit early Tuesday, but blustery winds blew leaves and trash swirling in the air.

Deaths blamed on the frigid weather included a 71-year-old woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease who froze to death after getting lost in New York state.

The body of a 90-year-old woman was found face down in the snow next to her car in Ohio on Monday morning, the Toledo Blade reported.

At least a dozen other people were reportedly killed in crashes on icy roads, including four people



Ice builds up along Lake Michigan as temperatures dipped well below zero on January 6, 2014 in Chicago, Illinois

"We are facing a dangerous combination of low temperatures, black ice and snow drifts," Quinn said, as he urged people to stay off the roads.

Quinn praised the "heroic" efforts of National Guard troops who cleared a 375-vehicle backup and a forestry officer who rescued seven stranded people and two of their pets using a snowmobile.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, officials warned residents to stay indoors and urged schools to shut down as temperatures dropped to -12 Fahrenheit, with the wind chill making it feel like -37.

"Police are reaching out to homeless citizens in order to help them find the nearest shelter," city spokeswoman Sarah DeRoo told AFP.

Indianapolis mayor Greg Ballard barred everyone except emergency workers from driving at the height of the storm Sunday and urged residents to stay indoors unless absolutely necessary on Monday.

"This extreme cold poses a serious health and safety risk," he warned.

But with thousands of people without power after electrical lines were felled, home was not always the best option.

Those who couldn't stay with family or friends were urged to seek out community centers which were opened as temporary shelters.

The extreme cold disrupted flights and classes in Canada as well. In the Atlantic island province of Newfoundland, more than 30,000 people were without power.

Nationwide, officials warned of "treacherous" travel conditions, but meteorologists said a warming trend would begin mid-week.

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