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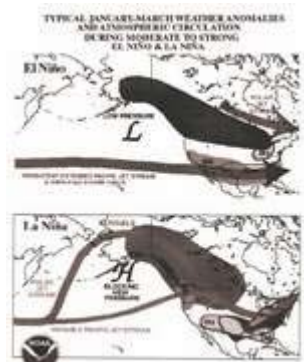


1969 | Tahoe's record-setting winter

January and February saved the Sierra snowpack, and then some
JANUARY, 16 2009

Santa was good to Tahoe this Christmas. By mid-December there were few ski resorts open due to a lack of snow, but then the Pacific storm door blew open and powerful cold fronts pounded the Sierra. In the second half of December, Squaw picked up 123 inches of snow; Alpine Meadows and Mammoth Mountain each reported about 13 feet. Kirkwood Mountain Resort just south of Lake Tahoe is now reporting a base nearly 9 feet deep.

Despite good news from the resorts, officials from California and Nevada are worried. You can sum it up with one word, water. On Dec. 30, snow surveyors conducting the first survey of the season found the snowpack's water content 83 percent of normal. Lake Tahoe is so low it is feeding very little water into the Truckee River. It's critical this winter be wetter than normal to help recharge the watershed because the last two years have been drier than average.



January is historically the wettest month with more than 9 inches of precipitation (rain and snowfall water content combined) expected near Donner Pass, which is about 18 percent of the annual total. Storms during January normally produce 81 inches of snow, fully one fifth of all the snow expected for the season.

There is still plenty of winter left, but a developing pattern change in the Pacific Ocean is causing some concern. Sea surface temperatures in the equatorial regions are cooling, indicative of a La Nina event. Persistent high pressure in the eastern Pacific is often associated with the La Nina event, which often diverts the storm-steering jet stream north into Canada, bringing wet conditions to the Pacific Northwest and dry conditions to California. The sea surface cool down indicates an unusually late starting La Nina and the Climate Prediction Center is now forecasting below average precipitation in the southwestern states.

It's true the region is slightly off pace for precipitation to date, but it's too early to panic. Sometimes winter gets off to a slow start. Forty years ago, the record-setting winter of 1968-69 also opened up late. With only 2 to 3 feet of snow at the resorts by mid-December, there was just enough for skiers to whoop it up but then, similar to this year, heavy snow and wind gusts in excess of 100 mph tore into the region around Christmas. Snowfall was plentiful, but not extreme. Squaw Valley picked up a total of 105 inches during December 1968.

On the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, temperatures plummeted. Reno broke a 71-year-old record with a morning low of 3 degrees below zero. Carson City reported a bitter 18 below, which was exceeded by Truckee at minus 19 degrees. That week 50 people were trapped on the Pioneer lift at Slide Mountain Ski Resort when gusty winds hooked a chair into a tower and bent the cable wheel. Night was approaching and temperatures falling toward zero as ski patrol crews worked to rescue the stranded skiers. It was dark when the last shivering skier was belayed down by rope, an hour and a half after the accident.

The Sierra Storm King worked more magic throughout January and February. Snowfall totals soared to nearly 300 percent of normal as a powerful jet stream drove storm after storm into the mountains. A juicy impulse that hit on Jan. 13 hammered Soda Springs with 45 inches; 10 days later more than 70 inches fell in 48 hours. That second system piled 75 inches of fresh snow on the Mount Rose Ski Resort, setting Nevada's all-time single-storm record.

At Donner Pass, snow fell continuously for 11 days, which added another 13.5 feet to the pack. By the end of January ski areas were reporting impressive snow depths. Squaw Valley was struggling with 23 feet; Mount Rose had 25 feet, while the Boreal Ridge ski area near Donner Pass reported it was buried under massive drifts 18 to 40 feet deep.




The active weather pattern set several Nevada snowfall records that still stand. On Valentine's Day, the Silver State's **24-hour snowfall record was broken when 3 feet buried** Daggett Pass near the Kingsbury Grade, east of Lake Tahoe. A total of 139 inches of snow fell on Daggett Pass during February 1969, and the maximum snow depth there reached 14.5 feet, both new state records.

In late February, two snow surveyors near Big Whitney Meadow in the Southern Sierra measured 12 feet of new snow in just 48 hours! Persistent storms and huge snow drifts as high as 40 feet closed the Mt. Rose road (Route 431) for 37 days. The season total at Mt. Rose of more than 59 inches of precipitation (rain and melted snow combined) set a new record for Nevada's wettest calendar year.

In California, the winter snowpack topped out near 100 inches deep in Tahoe City, but ski areas on Donner Summit boasted depths more than twice that. In February, the percentage of mean monthly snowfall in the Central Sierra reached nearly 1,000 percent of normal.

On April 1, Squaw Valley ski resort reported about 30 feet of snow on the upper mountain and declared they would keep their lifts running until July 7.

The big storms of 1968-69 set plenty of weather records in Nevada and dumped 601 inches of snow at the Central Sierra Snow Lab near Donner Pass. **The amazing thing was nearly all of the snow came after New Year's Day.**

— Mark McLaughlin's column, "Weather Window," appears every other week  in the Sierra Sun. He is a nationally published writer and photographer whose award-winning books, are  available at local stores. Mark, a Carnelian Bay resident, can be  reached at mark@thestormking.com

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