

Ottawa's coldest winter in 20 years: Here's why the season has felt so very long

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Pedestrians on Bank St. enjoy a noon hour break. A blast of cold arctic like weather settled over the Ottawa area with a high of minus 16 C and an overnight low expected to be minus 21 C makes the first day of spring on March 20th seem very far away.

Photograph by: Pat McGrath , Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — Ottawa is enduring the coldest winter in 20 years, but here's an odd fact: It hasn't set any records.

Hasn't even hit -30 C (or -28 C), for that matter.

This winter's mean streak comes from the fact that it just hasn't taken a break.

That makes it the coldest winter since 1993-94, says Chris Scott, chief meteorologist of the Weather Network.

"This was a winter that looked a lot more like the late 1970s" than recent years, he said.

But in the longer term, it's not unusual — tied for ninth-coldest in the past 50 years. It illustrates how winters are getting warmer.

Here is how this winter stands out:

- It arrived early and hung on.

It's been winter since November. By Nov. 27 we had 25 centimetres of snow on the ground, and December brought major dumps.

The Rideau Canal Skateway opened Dec. 31, the earliest in nine years.

And the temperature, though not extreme in December, was constantly cold instead of the usual December pattern of some freezing and some thaws. The average high was -5.7 and the average low -13.6, which isn't that unusual. But only one day in early December had an average temperature above freezing.

- The month was solid white. January and February had only brief thaws, and those brought rain and freezing rain with a sheet of ice afterwards. Environment Canada says the average Ottawa winter has 41 days that fall below -15 C. This year we have had 49 so far (including Monday) and Tuesday looks like a sure bet.

Last winter was milder: 34 nights below -15 C. The previous year had just 19, ending with the ridiculous "March melt." Remember when it hit 28.8 C one day in

Petawawa? Warmest March day in Canada, ever.

- Reliable weather for winter sports.

It has been a good year for Camp Fortune, says owner Peter Sudermann, and school groups have come in large numbers.

“Right now we’re into (Quebec’s) March break and we’re still feeling these mid-winter conditions,” he said. “But when you have a day like today, with blue skies and no wind, I think we’re at a high of (minus-)11, when you’re out on the snow it feels a lot warmer, and as a result I think we’re going to have a long ski season.”

- The Toronto effect.

Like it or not, when Toronto sneezes, everyone catches a cold. Toronto has had a ferociously cold (for them) winter. It has regularly been colder than Ottawa — and windier.

Toronto had winds of 40 kilometre an hour or more on 20 days in January. Eight of those days reached the 60s. Two reached 82 km/h.

“We did get it in Eastern Ontario but it wasn’t as bad,” Scott said. “The bull’s-eye of where this winter hit the hardest was west of Ottawa,” around the Great Lakes and Manitoba.

Ottawa was five degrees colder than Toronto this winter, but less windy and without as many whiteouts.

Blizzard winds closed Pearson airport and caused massive highway accidents.

- But a record cold? Not quite.

The lowest temperatures in Ottawa this winter have been -27.6 (December), -

27.8 (January) and -24.9 (February.) Record cold marks for most dates in winter are below -30 C.

- Wind chill is sometimes reported today in place of temperature, which makes the weather sound worse.

Scott, however, says this was a winter when the wind chill really mattered, especially in southern Ontario, which caught the edge of the U.S. “polar vortex.”

“I felt it myself,” he said. “There were times when it was as cold as I’ve ever felt.

“Even if it’s just -20 C but you have a 40- (or) 50-kilometre wind, no matter how you’re bundled up, you’re going to get that air close to you stripped away. And it does become life-threatening.”

- The good news: The weekend forecast for Ottawa predicts -1 C on Saturday and -2 C on Sunday.