

California Weather History

Weather generates a lot of talk and exaggeration. Historical observations reveal truth and show the media hype is over the top. The scope of weather we have been experiencing is to be expected. Bay Area // Native Son Extreme drought. Excessive rainfall, wind and snow.

It's all part of California's DNA Carl Nolte Email: cnolte@sfchronicle.com Jan. 7, 2023.
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The wind was howling, the streets were flooding, the rivers were rising, and the mayor was telling San Franciscans to stay home. It was a stormy way to begin a new year.

Unforgettable. But Californians, lulled by three years of drought and mild winters, seem to have forgotten one of the dangers of living in the Golden State: Nature can turn on you in a flash. And it's always a surprise: floods, droughts, wildfires, earthquakes are all in California's DNA. When a big rainstorm comes roaring in off the Pacific we are always amazed. The social media is full of talk about the "new normal" and dire predictions.

"Droughts, floods and wildfires are the normal part of the risk we take when we live here," said Sandy Lydon, a professor emeritus at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz County. "The landscape, the backdrops of where we live, is dynamic," he said. Lydon offered some evidence: High winds knocked down a very old tree near his home and cut his electric power, and powerful storm-driven surf took out two wharves on the nearby shore.

"Everybody is going to call this historical," Lydon said. "But it's not. It's all happened before. It's part of the game... But when the sun comes out, they forget about it." Weather, he thinks, runs in cycles. We just have to pay attention. But like others interested in weather, Lydon likes to talk about the great winter of 1861-62, the mother of all natural catastrophes in California. "It rained for 43 straight days," he said. "Imagine a storm like the one we had just now every day for six weeks without letup, without a single sunny day." It had snowed heavily that November and early December, an early winter. But in mid-December, heavy, warm rains came in and melted the snowpack, flooding the entire Central Valley from around Redding to Bakersfield — 300 miles of water, 30 feet deep in some places. Perhaps 4,000 people were killed, and the damage was estimated at \$3 billion in today's money. The next season was entirely different: a huge drought. Practically no rain at all. The drought was so severe that thousands of cattle died of starvation or thirst. At that time, Southern California was largely pastoral, a practice left from Spanish and Mexican times. That drought ended those days forever and led to a Southern California search for a reliable water supply and the subsequent growth of Los Angeles. The drought led to wildfires that blackened the sky in the summer and fall of 1865. There were major earthquakes in 1865 and in October 1868. The 1868 quake, on the Hayward Fault, did considerable damage in San Francisco. Mark Twain, then a San Francisco newspaper reporter, covered it. Later that year there was an outbreak of smallpox in Northern California. So in six years California had a flood, a drought, wildfires, two earthquakes and a plague. But enough of old-time disasters — bad weather happens all the time. Many Californians have not forgotten the winter of 2017 — just over five years ago — when heavy rains nearly caused the Oroville Dam spillways to fail. More than 180,000 people downstream were evacuated. Or the floods on the Russian River, as recently as 2019. That's important, because the river is just now rising again. I remember an earlier Russian River flood, when I was sent up there as a reporter. It was the second so-called 100-year flood that year. We had to use a canoe to visit a bed-and-breakfast place; the water was up to the second floor. I remember seeing propane tanks floating down the flooded river, like escaped submarines. Two floods in a single year. Historic. There was another trip the next season through the low country where

the Yuba River had broken through a levee and the countryside was awash in brown water. Photographer Brant Ward and I talked to a family whose house had flooded. They'd taken everything outside, clothes, furniture and all, but the house was pretty much ruined. It all had a bitter, sour smell. It was February, the sun had come out after the flood, and all the fruit trees had just started to bloom, pink and white, like a picture on a calendar of springtime in sunny California. We live in the moment in California. That's part of our DNA, too. Everything is dramatic. Even the weather comes with a Hollywood touch: Forecasters now use words like atmospheric rivers, bomb cyclones and king tides, all recently coined terms to describe conditions that have happened for thousands of years. You know how it is. A new story every night. Meanwhile, just before our own big sets of rain and wind, an immense snowstorm swept the East. Mountains of snow and ice — 52 inches of snow in Buffalo. Thirty-seven people died in Erie County. Now that is real weather.

Carl Nolte's columns appear in The San Francisco Chronicle's Sunday edition. Email: cnolte@sfchronicle.com Carl Nolte is a fourth generation San Franciscan who has been with The Chronicle since 1961. He stepped back from daily journalism in 2019 after a long career as an editor and reporter including service as a war correspondent. He now writes a Sunday column, "Native Son." He won several awards, including a distinguished career award from the Society of Professional Journalists, a maritime heritage award from the San Francisco Maritime Park Association, and holds honorary degrees from the University of San Francisco and the California State University Maritime Academy.

11 Comments