

Early Season Snowstorm Brings Northern Plains to a Standstill

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Winter started earlier than normal when a major snowstorm hit the northern high plains October 4-5, 2005. Snowfall of 6 to 12 inches, with as much as 22 inches in west central North Dakota, brought the region to a standstill and caused 2.5 million dollars in damage.

The storm broke several records for the most snow so early in the season and shattered daily snowfall records across eastern Montana, northeastern Wyoming, western North Dakota, and northwestern South Dakota. Although measurable snow has occurred in the region as early as late September; other early fall storms, including those on September 23-24, 1984 and October 7-8, 1985, have not produced as much snow or the widespread blizzard conditions as this storm.

The snow was caused by a strong low pressure system that developed over Colorado and moved northeast into the Dakotas. The warm air ahead of the system brought very moist air into the region. Widespread rain began on October 4th and changed to snow in central Montana during the afternoon. The rest of the region switched over to snow during the overnight hours as cold air pushed south from Canada behind the low. Heavy snow continued through the night and spread eastward. The snow diminished by early morning of the 5th over south-central Montana and northeastern Wyoming, but continued through the day over the eastern plains of Montana and the Dakotas. As the low moved northeast, strong north winds of 30 to 40 mph with gusts near 50 mph produced blizzard conditions for nearly 8 hours across east central Montana and western North Dakota through the day.

Travel was almost impossible across the 50,000 square mile region. Interstate 94 was closed for almost 300 miles from Miles City, MT to Bismarck, ND due to the heavy snow and the blizzard conditions. Other state and federal highways were either closed or under a no travel advisory. In North Dakota, the National Guard was activated to rescue stranded motorists. Hundreds of motorists and occupants of three buses were rescued. In a 23 mile stretch of Interstate 94, from Dickinson to Richardton, 100 occupied vehicles were stranded. In Dickinson, snowplows accompanied emergency response vehicles to incidents.

Downed and broken electric lines caused widespread power outages. In eastern Montana, over 16,000 people were without electric power and nearly 21,200 people lost electric service in North Dakota. In the northern Black Hills; 5,000 residents were without power. Some schools stayed open and relied on light from windows for students to see, but many others closed because they could not provide heat.

Other damage was caused when the heavy wet snow broke thousands of tree branches, most of which still had leaves on them.

The storm was preceded by a different type of record-breaking conditions: High temperatures in the 80s and 90s on October 1. In North Dakota, Williston, Dickinson, and Bismarck had temperatures in the lower 90s and Beulah, ND reached 96 degrees. Rapid City, SD recorded a high of 94 degrees on the 1st and dropped to a high of only 37 degrees by the 5th. Wibaux, MT went from a high of 90 degrees on October 1st to a near record low of 10 degrees on the 6th. The record cold was also felt at Williston with 12 degrees and Dickinson at 11 degrees the morning of the 6th.