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Snow, sleet as spring approaches; expect up to 4 cm at higher elevations

Eastern Canada basks in balmy, summerlike conditions while the West Coast shivers

BY MIKE HAGER, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 19, 2012

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Snowy Spring here as Hannah Bergeron, 10, and Elizabeth Ajtony 11, (pink) take a wild ride in the toboggan, park atop of North Vancouver's Mount Seymour during spring break on March 19, 2012.

Photograph by: Mark van Manen, PNG

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As eastern Canadians basked in sunshine and summer temperatures, Lower Mainland residents greeted the first official day of spring with colder than normal weather, rain and a dusting of snow.

Although spring didn't officially begin in B.C. until 10:14 p.m. Monday, snow fell early in the morning throughout Metro Vancouver with more forecast for later that night.

Icy road conditions in the morning caused delays for commuters and transit passengers.

TransLink temporarily stopped all buses from attempting the slippery climb up Burnaby Mountain to Simon Fraser University Monday morning.

The City of Vancouver mobilized nine trucks to salt commuter arteries and hilly streets as the snow hit.

As for later in the day, Environment Canada was predicting rain mixed with snow in low-lying parts of Metro Vancouver and as much as four centimetres over elevated neighbourhoods.

Meanwhile on Monday, Winnipeg reached a balmy 25 C and Toronto neared 21 C.

Global BC weather anchor Arran Henn said this winter, which has brought the La Niña weather pattern, has been colder than average.

"It's below normal for this time of year," Henn said. "Normally we see a high of 11 [C] and a low of 3 [C] and we've been seeing below that."

It may be cooler than usual, but this isn't the latest snowfall Metro Vancouver has seen.

On April 19, 2008, Vancouver International Airport and Lynn Valley both reported eight centimetres of snow.

This year's cold weather has already put the spring growing season behind, but it could catch up.

Douglas Justice, head of the University of B.C.'s botanical garden, thinks this spring growing season could start almost a week earlier than last year, which was also longer and cooler than normal.

"Last year we were delayed about three weeks by the time we got to May," Justice said.

"And this year, judging by what we see now, we're kind of 10 days to two weeks behind, but that could be easily be erased come April."

He said that, like a typical La Niña year, the cooler spring won't affect gardeners with perennials, but it will frustrate those hoping to start planting vegetable crops.

"The critical time really is April," Justice said. "If April stays cold and we don't get any rest from the rain and cool temperatures by the first of May — then it means the soil will take too long to warm up [for a decent growing season]."

Vancouver's iconic cherry blossom festival could also be hit by a lagging spring.

"The really early cherries flower normally, but the ones that would normally come out, say the first of April, come out a week or two later," Justice said. "And everything gets pushed back."

"That creates havoc because the cherry blossom festival is essentially the month of April."

While those with green thumbs may be cursing the weather, skiers and snowboarders are rejoicing in the powder blanketing the province's ski hills.

Whistler Blackcomb expected up to 15 cm of new snow Monday night and more today.

The ski resort issued a public warning after 150 cm of new snow fell last week. Noting many avalanches occurred last week, it strongly cautioned those using the back country about the considerable avalanche risk.

"The avalanche danger may rapidly increase on steep solar aspects if the sun makes even a brief appearance," the statement said.

The North Shore mountains are listed as moderately dangerous for avalanche risk, but the risk has been elevated to high for Tuesday.

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