

## Breath of spring softens New England winter

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER



*KARLY DOMB SADOFF*

*Amy Krauss (right) and Mareika Windchell enjoy the spring like temperatures in the Verizon parking-lot off Masonic St.*

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Last week, near record-low temperatures and howling winds were almost unbearable for Bob Church, an Easthampton postal carrier for 25 years. This week the sunshine and warmth gave Church a chance to leave his gloves at home.

'When you get a couple of days like this it's a real tease,' said Church, who has never been told to take a day off because of the weather. 'You tend to think, 'yeah, spring is here,' but in the back of your mind you know it's not. But it's a nice thought, anyway.'

While meteorologists say a thaw in January - often the coldest month of the year - is not uncommon, what is uncommon is a record-high temperature with snow on the ground.

'We went from record lows last week to record highs this week, and my backyard is covered in snow,' said Brandon Butcher, meteorologist for CBS Channel 3 News in Springfield. 'I find it fascinating.'

Hartford, Boston, Providence and Worcester reached record-high temperatures for the date on Tuesday, according to Charlie Foley, meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Taunton. Locally, Worthington reached a Jan. 8 record-high temperature of 62 degrees Tuesday. The town's Jan. 8 record low was minus-4 degrees in 1999, according to Janet Fisher, climatologist for the Northeast Climate Center.

This week's warm spell is an effect of Midwest tornadoes that killed at least three people Tuesday, Butcher said. The tornadoes broke out after air masses clashed along the storm's cold front, causing warmer southwestern air to channel up from the Gulf of Mexico toward the Northeast and away from the Midwest, where the southwest air normally goes.

'When storms get big like this, they control the weather for 1,000 miles,' Butcher said. 'It wasn't just New England that broke records - it was all over the place.'

The jet stream, which is fairly close to New England during the winter, was farther north than normal Tuesday and Wednesday, giving people warmer January weather, lower energy bills and a time-out from winter sports, said Keith Eggleston, climatologist for the Northeast Climate Center.

This break in the winter cycle also causes animals to come out of hibernation, car wash visits to increase by nearly 80 percent, and concerns to rise about ice sports.

'Ice is never safe,' said Easthampton Deputy Fire Chief David Mottor, who noted that all the town bodies of water have moving water, rather than still water. 'The safest place to go skating is the skating rink.'

Mottor said people should refrain from going out on Lower Mill, Rubber Thread and Nashawannuck ponds, as there is no real way to tell where the ice is thicker. Also, the current can sweep people away from the hole they fell through.

'You may have one spot with 6 inches of ice, walk 2 feet and there's 2 inches of ice,' Mottor said.

The 2004-05 winter saw a couple of incidents where ice fishermen fell through the ice, but none has been reported this year, he said.

In the woods, black bears may be seen out of hibernation, according to Marion Larson, information and education biologist for the Massachusetts Division of Fish and Wildlife. She said the bears look for food, particularly from bird feeders, when the air is warmer and the snow begins to melt. Likewise, turkeys come out to scratch the ground for nuts and acorns. Mice that build tunnels in the snow begin to build them underground and, if the snow is really melting, beaver and muskrat homes may flood.

For the midwinter bald eagle count Friday, bird-watchers could be disappointed, because the melting ice causes birds to scatter more widely along the rivers while searching for food, Larson said.

But it won't be long before bears go back into hibernation, postal carriers put on their gloves and rivers begin to freeze again.

Today's temperatures are expected to drop into the upper 40s, while the weekend and next week will be in the 20s and 30s, with a chance of snow Monday, according to Foley.

Start your engines with common sense Monday, said Joe Pipczynski, superintendent of public works in Easthampton.

'People have a short-term memory loss when driving in the snow,' Pipczynski said. He noted that flooding was not a problem in Easthampton on Tuesday and Wednesday. 'When winter comes back I think it's going to be a learning curve all over again. People can't expect the road conditions to be the way they are in dry weather.'

When it snows again, Pipczynski advises people to leave earlier to get where they're going, drive slowly and expect delays.

Church, of Westhampton, said delivering mail is difficult when he has to hug large, solid-frozen snowbanks in order to park his car and then walk for nearly five hours as cold winds burn his face.

'You just deal with it,' he said.

It's no surprise Church says warmer January days like Tuesday and Wednesday are 'paradise.'

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