

March 2003 Weather in Review for Oklahoma

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Oklahoma's weather during March seemed more lamb than lion. The onset of the state's primary severe weather season did provide some thrills, however, as the state experienced its first tornadoes since last September. Despite the presence of several flooding rainfalls and exceedingly warm weather, however, the month finished both cooler and drier than normal. Data from the Oklahoma Mesonet indicate that the month was the 47th coolest and 43rd driest March the state has experienced since record keeping began in 1892.

The statewide-averaged temperature finished 1.7 degrees below normal at 49.3 degrees, as the frigid weather during the latter parts of February spilled into the first week of March. The state's coldest temperature, 12 degrees, occurred on the 6th of the month at El Reno, Mangum, and Oilton. Temperatures moderated soon after, however, and more seasonable temperatures dominated the remainder of the month. Altus Air Force Base reached 90 degrees on the 24th – the first 90 degree temperature in the state since October, as well as the highest temperature recorded during March.

Statewide-averaged precipitation fell 1.10 inches below normal at 1.96 inches. Much of western and southern Oklahoma experienced a precipitation deficit of at least 50 percent of normal for the month. West central and southwestern Oklahoma were particularly hard hit, both falling below 40 percent of normal precipitation. Northern sections of the state fared better; especially the northeast, where precipitation totals approached normal. Despite the precipitation deficit, data from the Mesonet's soil moisture network indicated moist soil conditions statewide down to more than two feet, with the exception of the Oklahoma Panhandle. Soil conditions there showed signs of drying in the deeper soil layers.

The first twister of the new year touched down five miles southwest of Gotebo in Kiowa County on the 17th, damaging a house before dissipating. A second tornado dropped from the same thunderstorm minutes later and traveled 3 miles before lifting back into the sky. Another minor tornado was reported by spotters near Pumpkin Center in Comanche County with no reported damage. The tornadoes were the first reported in the state since two minor twisters briefly touched down in northern Oklahoma on September 18th of the previous year. There were no tornadoes reported during March of 2001 or 2002. March has averaged four tornadoes per year since accurate statistic-keeping began in 1950.

The thunderstorms that spawned those tornadoes brought widespread severe weather to southwestern, central, and north central Oklahoma on the 17th, with numerous occurrences of hail up to 2 inches in diameter reported across the area. Tennis ball sized hail pounded Duncan, and winds of over 60 mph were spread throughout that part of the state. The stormy weather continued through the 18th and 19th, with the main culprit being

heavy rainfall those days. Excessive rain created flooding on the Chikaskia and Salt Fork Rivers in north central Oklahoma. Earlier in the month, on the 12th, over 4000 customers were left without power as a line of severe thunderstorms passed through central Oklahoma. Lightning from the storms ignited the roof of a residence, and golf ball sized hail fell in Logan County. As the storms moved east, strong winds blew the roof partially off at Frink-Chambers Elementary School in McAlester. More storms associated with a cold frontal passage on the 24th brought scattered reports of large hail in central Oklahoma.

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