

Weather of 2003

Cold Winter with Massive February Snow Storm, Cool, Very Wet and Record Snowy Year

2003 will be well remembered for its abundant precipitation, record snow and cool temperatures. The winter of '02-'03 was one of the coldest, snowiest on record, and every season had above normal precipitation. Temperatures were below normal most months.

The year was off to a busy start. On New Year's Day, heavy rain (1.47") fell, melting several inches of snow and causing minor flooding. Another storm followed on its heels and brought heavy wet snow (2.0") on the 3rd. After that, a persistent west to northwest flow over the mountains dried things out but produced a cold, windy, blustery weather pattern with frequent light snows. The low dipped to a chilly 2 F on the 23rd, and January 2003 was the coldest January since 1994, and ranked 5th coldest January ever.

The chilly weather and frequent light snows continued into February. By mid-month, a high pressure to the north, an approaching mid-latitude cyclone and perfect atmospheric dynamics led to a snow storm for the ages. Early on the 15th, a warm front slowly approached the area from the south. 2.5" of snow fell that morning, and after a brief lull, a full blooded blizzard paralyzed the entire state on the 16th and 17th (President's Day) with an incredible 28 inches of snow by mid-morning on the 17th. 18" fell on the 16th, a single-day February record. Some parts of Maryland reported thunder-snow and over 3 feet from this massive storm. This storm ranked 2nd in total snowfall and rivaled the record-setting Blizzard of 1996.

A few days later, heavy rain fell on the 21st-22nd. This area escaped the brunt of the rain, with less than an inch falling, but much of Maryland east of the mountains suffered from collapsed roofs and flooded roads and rivers. February 2003 was the snowiest February on record with 36.5" during the month. It was also the coldest February since 1980 and completed the coldest winter season since 1993-94.

March saw a bit of a respite from all the cold, snowy weather. Temperatures began to moderate after a cold start. A heavy, cold rain (1.40") fell on the 20th and was the heaviest of the month. The final week was mild until a cold front on the 30th brought a late-season snowfall totaling 3.5 inches.

Temperatures made a big rebound in early April, with a high of 80 F on the 3rd. But a cold front passed through on the 5th, and two days later a major ice storm hit the area. A total of 1.33" of precipitation fell on the 7th along with 1.0" of snow, sleet and glaze – quite a nasty late season winter storm. More freezing rain fell in the mountains on the 9th. Temperatures rebounded to a warm 86 on the 15th.

Rain, thunderstorms and fog summed up May's weather. It rained almost constantly. 23 of 31 days saw measurable rainfall, a new monthly record. There were 19 days with fog and 7 days with thunder. A total of 8.14" of rain fell, the second wettest May on record and the wettest month since September 1996. Meanwhile, the fog was unreal. Near-zero visibilities on I-68 atop Big Savage Mountain caused a deadly 85-vehicle pile-up on the 23rd and made national headlines. All the rain and fog held temperatures on the cool side nearly all month long, with a record low average max temperature of 65.7 F.

June started off cool and wet and remained that way until the first day of summer, when seasonably warm temperatures finally arrived. Lows were in the 40s the first week with highs in the 60s and 70s and one day in the mid 50s. That day was the 3rd, with a high of 55, the lowest max temperature ever recorded in June or any summer month. Also, heavy rains (1.77") fell that day. Nearly six inches fell during the month, although no measurable rain fell after the 21st. The monthly average temperature of 65.5 tied 1992 for the 3rd coolest June on record.

Temperatures remained slightly cooler than normal in July. The hottest stretch of the month was from the 4th-8th, all five days in the low 90s. After the 8th, the temperature did not reach 90 the rest of the month. There were frequent showers and thunderstorms in the area, most of which seemed to bypass this station in one direction or another. Precipitation was slightly below normal, despite many days of rainfall.

August was a warm, humid month with numerous showers and thunderstorms. Measurable rain fell 11 of the first 12 days, and 12 days had thunder during the month. Heavy rain and damaging winds occurred near Lonaconing and Cumberland from a squall line on the 3rd, and on the 5th another storm flooded parts of Cumberland. Severe weather hit the area again on the 26th and 27th, when a series of southeastward moving cells caused minor wind damage. Trees were down in LaVale on the morning of the 27th. Meanwhile, August was by far the warmest month of 2003, with a mean temperature of 73.3 F.

Three tropical systems affected the area during September, most notably Isabel, which ravaged the Delmarva area along the Atlantic coast and the Chesapeake Bay, which was badly flooded. By sheer fluke, Allegany County was spared the worst of the storm, as its “eye” passed directly overhead. Major flooding and damaging winds that ravaged almost everywhere else, while we escaped all but minor flooding and tree damage. Still 2.36” rain fell, the heaviest 24-hour event of 2003. Frostburg recorded 3.74”. Heavy rain fell on the evening of the 22nd and again on the afternoon of the 27th, when a line of severe thunderstorms produced scattered wind damage, hail up to the size of quarters and an unofficial report of up to 4 inches of rain in parts of LaVale. Flash flooding hammered the western third of the county. September was the second wettest month of 2003 with 7.10” falling, the third wettest September on record. Four days had over an inch of rainfall. Temperatures were near normal with a lack of extremes in either direction.

The area received a much-needed break from all the rain and storms in early October. The month started off on the chilly side, with a freeze and frost on the 3rd. The quiet weather pattern came to an abrupt end on the 14th, when a squall line produced torrential rainfall and damaging winds. There were a few more minor systems during the rest of the month, mostly passing southeast of the area.

November was the only month of 2003 with significantly above normal temperatures. An Indian summer greeted the area with temperatures near 80 during the first four days. Cumberland reached 84 on the 3rd. Heavy rain fell on the night of the 11th-12th (1.38”), and the ensuing cold front kicked off ferocious winds on the 13th along with bitter cold temperatures and snow squalls totaling an inch. A week later, heavy rains, totaling 2.02”, fell on the 19th, causing some minor flooding in the area.

For the second consecutive year, heavy snows fell in early December, which racked up 20 inches of monthly snowfall and pushed 2003 to the highest calendar year snow total of 71.3 inches, barely beating out the 71.1” that fell in 1994. Two strong lows combined for 8.5” of snow on the 5th-6th. Heavy rain fell the evening of the 10th, before another major winter storm blanketed the area with 10.0” of snow on the 14th-15th. A light ice storm followed on the morning of the 17th. After a cold, wet and snowy few weeks, temperatures finally moderated during the final third of December.

2003 Weather Statistics

2003 Monthly and Annual Climate Summary LaVale, MD, Allegany County Observer Nate Mullins Station Observation Time: Midnight Lat: 39.657780°, Long: - 78.821871°, Elevation 1016'										
Month	Temperature, ° F							Number of days		
	Mean Max	Mean Min	Mean Temp	Max Temp	Date	Min Temp	Date	Max ≥ 90	Max ≤ 32	Min ≤ 32
Jan	29.7	18.7	24.2	44	8	2	23	0	21	29
Feb	36.0	21.5	28.7	48	3	11	6	0	8	26
Mar	52.3	30.4	41.3	77	25	12	11*	0	0	19
Apr	63.2	40.0	51.6	86	15	28	1	0	0	4
May	65.7	49.8	57.8	85	11	40	14*	0	0	0
Jun	75.5	55.4	65.5	90	25	42	2	1	0	0
Jul	81.9	61.6	71.7	91	8*	53	20	5	0	0
Aug	82.3	64.2	73.3	93	22	51	24	3	0	0
Sep	72.1	56.4	64.3	84	3	40	30	0	0	0
Oct	60.9	41.1	51.0	74	12*	29	24	0	0	4
Nov	53.9	37.3	45.6	79	3	20	10	0	0	11
Dec	38.7	25.5	32.1	51	23	16	16	0	6	30
Year	59.4	41.8	50.6	93	8/22	2	1/23	9	35	123

Precipitation, Inches				Number of days				Snow/ice, Inches		
Month	Total Precip	Max Day	Date	> 0.01"	> 0.10"	> 0.50"	> 1.00"	Total Snow	Max Day	Date
Jan	2.64	1.47	1	10	5	2	1	8.0	2.0	3
Feb	4.85	1.77	16	16	12	3	1	36.5	18.0	16
Mar	3.10	1.32	20	10	6	2	1	3.8	3.5	30
Apr	3.55	1.33	7	12	7	2	1	1.0	1.0	7
May	8.14	0.98	31	24	19	6	0	0.0	0.0	-
Jun	5.79	1.77	3	10	8	4	2	0.0	0.0	-
Jul	3.05	0.65	10	16	9	1	0	0.0	0.0	-
Aug	4.07	0.69	27	18	11	3	0	0.0	0.0	-
Sep	7.10	1.74	27	17	10	5	4	0.0	0.0	-
Oct	2.54	1.16	14	12	5	2	1	0.0	0.0	-
Nov	4.76	2.02	19	11	7	3	2	2.0	1.0	29*
Dec	3.34	1.02	14	11	6	3	1	20.0	9.5	14
Year	52.93	2.02	11/19	167	105	36	14	71.3	18.0	2/16
Note: * = also occurred on earlier dates that month										
Number of days with										
Month	Fog	Sleet	Glaze	Thunder	Hail	Dmg wind				
Jan	4	2	0	0	0	0				
Feb	6	0	2	0	0	0				
Mar	6	0	0	0	0	0				
Apr	10	1	1	1	0	0				
May	19	0	0	7	0	0				
Jun	6	0	0	4	0	0				
Jul	3	0	0	9	0	0				
Aug	16	0	0	12	0	0				
Sep	17	0	0	4	1	0				
Oct	7	0	0	0	0	1				
Nov	8	0	0	0	0	1				
Dec	1	2	1	0	0	0				
Year	103	5	4	37	1	2				