

April Weather Runs the Gamut
May 1, 2017

April took its penchant for widely varying weather to near satirical extremes across Oklahoma. Floods, tornadoes, drought and blizzards – Mother Nature pulled out all the stops to give Oklahoma nearly the entire gamut of weather hazards. As many as six separate storm systems traversed the state during April, but the worst was saved for last. A powerful upper-level storm impacted the state from the 28th through the 30th. Widespread rainfall amounts of 3-6 inches produced flooding from southwestern through northeastern Oklahoma. Portions of eastern Oklahoma received more than 8 inches over the two-day period. Numerous water rescues were necessary across the state. Severe storms produced large hail, damaging winds and a few tornadoes throughout the event. The historic arch at the State Fairgrounds in Oklahoma City was toppled by winds gusting to over 80 mph. Downed trees and power lines led to 40,000 electric utility customers losing power at the height of the storm. Several tornadoes were also reported with the storms across eastern Oklahoma. While it was flooding across the main body of the state, the Panhandle was experiencing an old fashioned High Plains blizzard. More than a foot of snow was reported in the far western Panhandle, while 4-8 inches fell farther to the east. The Cimarron County sheriff's department reported 15 inches of snow and drifts of 5 feet. The snow was whipped by winds gusting up to 70 mph on Sunday to create white-out conditions, closing roads and stranding travelers. Blizzard warnings were issued for Cimarron and Texas counties. Due to the scope of the storm system across the state, Governor Mary Fallin declared a state of emergency for all 77 counties.

Each succeeding system during the month added moisture to an already saturated Oklahoma. According to preliminary data from the Oklahoma Mesonet, the statewide average precipitation total was 6.82 inches, 3.56 inches above normal and the third wettest April since records began in 1895. Totals ranged from 1.82 inches at Erick in far western Oklahoma to 15.56 inches at Tahlequah in the east. Eighty-seven of the 121 Mesonet sites recorded at least 5 inches of rain, and 25 of those stations recorded more than 10 inches. All but seven Mesonet sites recorded at least 3 inches. Northeast Oklahoma saw its wettest April on record with an average of 11.3 inches, shattering the previous record of 9.27 inches set back in 1942. Tulsa broke its record for April rainfall with 10.44 inches, eclipsing the 9.33 inches from 2008. In addition to the snow received at the end of the month, the Panhandle recorded another 4-8 inches on April 2, exceeding their totals for the five previous months combined. The robust April precipitation totals propelled the January-April statewide average to the sixth wettest on record at 14.02 inches.

Despite the momentary bouts with winter, April's statewide average temperature still managed to finish 1.1 degrees above normal at 60.4 degrees, the 44th warmest April on record. The highest temperature recorded was 94 degrees at Beaver on the 19th. The lowest temperature, 28 degrees, was recorded at Kenton on April 2 and again at Eva on the 23rd. The January-April statewide average temperature was 51.9 degrees, 4.5 degrees above normal and the third warmest such period on record.

Drought took a major hit during April. The final U.S. Drought Monitor map of the month depicted a mere 17% of the state experiencing drought, a drop from 78% on March's final map. That is the smallest percentage of the state in drought since Oct. 11, 2016. A portion of the drought that remained received significant rainfall during the month's final days, so more drought removal is likely.

The latest outlooks for May from the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) yield few clues for Oklahoma, although they do show slightly increased odds of below normal precipitation and temperatures for far northeastern Oklahoma. That last bastion of drought across eastern Oklahoma is expected to improve by the end of May according to CPC's U.S. Drought Outlook, with removal likely.

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