

Ol' Reliable: When winter disappoints, keep a cool head

A.L. Alford Jr./Lewiston Tribune

Memo to snowmobilers, snowshoe enthusiasts and skiers: Another of those El Niños will affect our play-in-the-snow winter ahead.

That's right. On the heels of a hot summer in 2014, one in which Lewiston-Clarkston residents had double the average of triple-digit temperatures, we're going to have a winter that probably has warmer temperatures and less snow than normal in the mountains. I'll be surprised if it's a vintage snow skiing season at Schweitzer Mountain Resort near Sandpoint or Brundage Mountain near McCall - or if there's deep snowmobile snow in the Blue Mountains or elsewhere in our Lewiston Tribune area of winter play.

Should we slit our wrists, those of us who like to go to the snow?

No. No, said John Livingston of Spokane, meteorologist in charge at Spokane's regional federal weather bureau.

John, known to me as Reliable John, said that would be too extreme. There'll be skiing. There'll be snowmobiling. It just won't be an outstanding winter for those of us who seek the deepest of snow.

Reliable John said: Expect below-normal precipitation. Remember, since the late 1950s, the Inland Northwest has seen only average to slightly less than average precipitation in the winter season. It's not been drastic. Already, as usual in early November, the storm track has started with more rain and some day-to-day snow cover on top of the mountains.

Continued Reliable John: When skiers or snowmobilers hear El Niño, they're not pleased. The best way to look at it? Instead of one ski area rainout day each winter, you might get two in 2014-15. We'll have above-normal temperatures but not a heat wave. For November through mid-March, it will mean 1 to 2 degrees in temperature above what's normal.

So what's an El Niño?

An El Niño forms when unusually warm ocean temperatures begin to influence weather patterns. Temperatures in the Pacific Ocean along the equator are above normal and expected to stay so. If that develops as expected, its effects will be felt in the Northwest through the winter months.

And some recall of what was a hot summer in the valley?

Lewiston-Clarkston had 19 days with temperatures of 100 degrees or higher. That's double the average of 9.5 triple-digit days a year in the preceding 12 years, 2002 through 2013.

June had no triple-digit days for a sixth year in row.

July had 13 and August had six, with the last on Monday, Aug. 11. September, as usual, had none. The last September 100-degree day was in 2003.

The 19 triple-digit days marked the highest total since 2002, too, surpassing the 16 in 2003, the 13 in 2007 and the 12 in 2006. The fewest triple-digit days? One in 2010 (in July) and three in 2011 (three days consecutively in late August).

The longest streak in 2014? It was seven triple digits in a row from Sunday, July 27, through Saturday, Aug. 2. The hottest maximum of the year? It was 106 on Tuesday, July 29. Eleven of the 19 days were only 100 or 101. Not one of the 19 days set a record high for the date.

Yes, Reliable John agrees, summer of 2014 had its moments. June through August also had 0.24 fewer inches of precipitation than the normal, 2.35 inches vs. the average 2.59. But August had a half-inch more than average.

We count on precipitation through June, not longer. As Reliable John said, later summer rain would mean grumpy wheat and hay farmers.

Alford is president of Tribune Publishing, the parent company of the Lewiston Tribune. He may be contacted at alajr@lmtribune.com or at (208) 848-2250.