

No luck with October storms this year, but remember the blizzard of '04?

By Mark Grossi



In an October 2004 photograph, Yosemite climbing ranger Lincoln Else looks up at El Capitan, where he helped rescue climbers stranded by a storm.

MARK CROSSE — Fresno Bee Staff Photo [Buy Photo](#)

Ten years ago this month, the dry season ended with a blizzard pounding the high Sierra with 3 feet of snow, leaving two dead on Yosemite National Park's famous El Capitan.

It came to mind when someone emailed last week asking about the possibility of early storms in Central California. There haven't been any early storms this year, but I remember one that showed up in a frightening way 10 years ago.

While most of California would cheer the arrival of a blizzard right about now, the big October storm of 2004 turned a mellow month in the Sierra into a life-and-death time for backpackers, rock climbers and hikers.

Former Bee reporter Diana Marcum and I wrote about the whiteout conditions that stranded 10 hikers in the Sierra National Forest and five others in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

The storm surprised many people after a typical warm season in Central California. It hadn't rained more than a tenth of an inch in Fresno since mid-March. There had been 31 days of triple digits for the city, and the high temperature on Oct. 14 was 92 degrees.

Less than a week later, Fresno's high temperature was 60 degrees. In the Sierra, night-time temperatures suddenly dropped to the 20s as a cold storm passed. Upper Burnt Corral, a site at 9,700 feet, recorded a whopping 38 inches of snow.

I interviewed a 27-year-old climbing ranger named Lincoln Else, who had rappelled from the top of snow-capped granite to bring seven climbers in from the cold. He said the conditions surprised some experienced climbers, including the two Japanese climbers who died on El Capitan.

"It was a pretty gnarly situation," Else said. "Even with the best equipment, it's hard to stay dry and warm on a wall, compared to camping in a tent."

By the way, [the snowpack in the winter of 2004-05](#) peaked beyond 150% of average in the Southern Sierra, according to the numbers from the California Department of Water Resources.

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