

After a year off, winter is back in the Sierra — just not all the way

By Mark Grossi

KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK — At 7,500 feet, there's no mistaking winter. It's back in a crystalline flash, rejuvenating ancient granite with a breathtaking coat of white.

A snowshoe walk from Grant Grove Village to [Panoramic Point at 7,500 feet](#) in Kings Canyon National Park is a snow-crunching delight once again. California's rooftop finally is a brilliant white against an azure December sky.

But don't get your hopes too high yet. It's warm at 7,500 feet, and the southern Sierra snowpack is about half the size it should be for December.

Still, what a difference from last year when snow surveyors in January found mud above 10,000 feet in Kings Canyon National Park — a scene they said they had never witnessed before.

Like a scene from the Bill Murray movie "Groundhog Day," the high Sierra greeted every sunrise with that same muddy ground until late in the season. Last winter was among the driest on records dating back to the 1800s.

[NOAA this month](#) said the intense dry spell wasn't directly connected to climate change. But the dry weather combined with warm temperatures decimated the Sierra Nevada's snowpack, which is the keeper of more than half California's summer water.

Farmers, city leaders and industries are still quite worried. Naturalists come from a different perspective. They know the Sierra has been through this before.

Bill Tweed, retired Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks naturalist and author, said he remembers a February 1976 hike up to 9,000 feet — with no snow.

"We humans have short memories," he said. "The Sierra has seen much worse than this. The native ecosystems here are still alive because they are adapted to this."

The return of snow is a big contrast, especially at Panoramic Point, where the vista takes in landmarks from 13,564-foot Mount Goddard to the majestic North Palisade at 14,248 feet along the spine of the Sierra.

The rebirth is happening elsewhere, too. In Yosemite National Park, Yosemite Falls began running again just before Thanksgiving. On the eastern Sierra, Mammoth Ski Resort reports a base snow depth of up to 4 feet.

Along Highway 168 around Shaver Lake and China Peak Ski Resort, winter sports are finally waking up. Huntington Lake and snow play areas are attracting folks from the San Joaquin Valley. The winter outdoor playground is back.

And people who have never been to see these sights are again marveling at them. In Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, the stars are giant sequoias in the snow.

"This place is really amazing," said Ted Baudendistel, 43, of Salt Lake City, while making his first visit to the big trees at Grant Grove in Kings Canyon National Park with wife Jill, 35, and their three little ones — Sebastian, 5, Heidi, 3, and Nickolaus, 11 months.

How wet will this winter be? Federal forecasters say they expect [the drought to persist in California, but it will ease some](#). There's a 65% possibility of El Niño, the Pacific Ocean warming trend that sometimes means more storms for California.

If a few more big storms happen, it will mean a lot more than a welcome rush of water over the side of popular Yosemite Falls — which is a symbol of good times returning for nature after a drought. But there's so much more than a picturesque waterfall, says Paul Ollig, deputy chief of interpretation at Yosemite.

He called the Sierra “the water tower of California,” storing water for millions of people every year. To keep that water pristine, the Sierra ecosystem needs to remain healthy. The Sierra can withstand drought, but it needs that snowpack to return at some point, Ollig said.

“There is so much dependence on the water cycle in the Sierra,” he said. “The ecosystems here are dependent on the slow, gradual release of water throughout the warm months. I think a key biological community that relies on the gradual release of water is the giant sequoia.”

The snow is now wrapped at the foot of the 1,700-year-old General Grant Tree, the third-largest tree in the world and annually celebrated as the nation's Christmas tree. It was alive for centuries before a prolonged dry spell that happened about 1,000 years ago.

Some Sierra vegetation has died during the three-year drought in California, but many species are surviving, including California buckeye and blue oak in the foothills as well as incense cedar and ponderosa pine higher in the ecosystem.

“People have somehow become convinced that average precipitation is what we're supposed to get every year,” said Tweed, who lives in Three Rivers. “Average is a statistic. Nature lives with something other than average in many years. Plants and animals are adapted to the variability.”

Tweed said he has been cross-country skiing at Giant Forest in Sequoia National Park. There's just enough snow for his skis to skim over, and he doesn't want to take the chance of missing it now if the weather turns dry, as it did last year.

Likewise, people are snowshoeing and skiing popular Panoramic Point Trail, which is a little more than 2 miles with about 1,000 feet of elevation gain. The trail follows a paved road that is not plowed in the winter. It starts next to the John Muir Lodge at Grant Grove Village.

The asphalt showed through the snow in a few places, but the average depth in the area was 16 inches just before Christmas. It did not look like big storms had passed through here, even though big mid-December storms pounded the Bay Area and Southern California, causing flooding and damaging mudslides.

A snowshoe walker from San Francisco said he thought the storms this month had moved north and south, and did not hit very hard in the southern Sierra. Tweed agreed.

He said, “It has been warm lately, too. Let's hope this changes and soon.”

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