

Dreaming of a white Christmas? Dash it all – USATODAY.com

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December 19, 2011

By Doyle Rice, USA TODAY

Updated

If you're dreaming of a white Christmas, better stay asleep: For much of the [USA](#), it's looking as if brown will be the yuletide color this year.

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By Joshua A. Bickel, AP

Snowfall is off to a slow start across much of the USA.

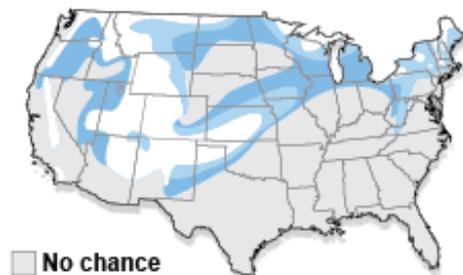
Although a potent snowstorm is expected to lash parts of the Southwest and central Plains today, the weather pattern is not conducive for big storms or cold in most of the eastern part of the country, [Weather Channel](#) meteorologist [Tom Moore](#) says.

"It looks bleak from a winter enthusiast's perspective," says Moore.

December snowfall is off to a very slow start across the USA. As of Sunday, total [U.S.](#) snowfall for the month is down 73% from last year and is 55% below average, says meteorologist Bill Kirk of the private forecasting firm [WeatherTrends360](#).

White Christmas likely for Western mountains, far North

Likely Possible Slight chance



Source: The Weather Channel
By Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

"It's the least snow in five years," he says, adding that national temperatures are also trending the warmest in five years.

There has been more snow so far this season in [Little Rock](#) than in Syracuse, N.Y. Syracuse has seen a paltry 1.7 inches, compared with the 6 feet it received last December. The North Little Rock Airport got 2.2 inches of snow Dec. 6-7.

Only 23.7% of the nation was covered by snow Sunday, the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration reports. Most of the snow cover is limited to high elevations of the western mountains, along with parts of the Plains, [Great Lakes](#) and northern [New England](#). That's a big change from the past two Decembers — last Christmas, 50% of the nation was snow-covered. In 2009, it was 63%.

As for [Christmas Day](#) itself Sunday, cold spots will be the Southwest and the south-central USA into Texas, Kirk says. Much of the upper Midwest and East will stay mild.

Northeastern ski areas are taking it hard. As of last week, only 16 of northern New England's 52 ski areas were open. Only one of Pennsylvania's 24 ski areas had opened. In upstate [New York](#), the ski areas that are open have very limited terrain.

Why the big change from the past two years? Blame it partly on the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO) climate pattern. The pattern is marked by large-scale swings in atmospheric pressure — which are known as "positive" or "negative" phases — over the north [Atlantic Ocean](#). The NAO strongly affects winter weather in the USA.

"The NAO was extremely negative last year, which usually correlates with cold, snowy weather in the East," says Moore. "Now, it's 180 degrees different from last year. It's extremely positive, which favors mild and dry conditions in the East."

So why do we care about white Christmases? The nation's fascination likely dates back to the 1940s, when [Bing Crosby](#) first sang "White Christmas," the wistful classic song in the film [Holiday Inn](#).

Written by Irving Berlin, the song's lyrics bring out a romanticized image of Christmases past.

The [National Weather Service](#) defines a white Christmas as having 1 inch of snow on the ground on Dec. 25. To fit the definition, it need not snow on Christmas Day.

Historically, most of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin, much of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and most of the Western mountain areas have a better than 90% chance of a white Christmas, the [National Climatic Data Center](#) reports.

Marquette, Mich., and [International Falls](#), Minn., have had snow on the ground every Christmas since weather record-keeping began. Both had a few inches on the ground Sunday -- although not very much, with just 4 inches reported in Marquette and 2 inches in International Falls.

Contributing: The Associated Press

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