

Get Wild: How seasonal snowpack affects outdoor recreation year-round

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Stasia Stockwell
Get Wild



Stasia Stockwell skis on a powder day.

Tom Callaghan/Courtesy photo

As winter begins to wane and spring lingers around the corner, it seems to be a good time to reflect on the season's snowpack. While seasonal snow totals affect everything from agriculture and wildfires across the state to tourism and the economy in Summit County, what does it mean for outdoor recreation?

For winter recreationists, seasonal snowfall is often measured by how many powder days we had over the season. But there's so much more to consider than just how many times you found yourself in "the white room." What the weather does all winter directly impacts what our recreation will look like throughout the summer.

Winter in Summit County began with a slow roll: The town of Breckenridge totaled just under 24 inches in November while Dillon stacked a mere 5.5 inches for the month, according to National Weather Service reports.

But winter isn't done with us here in the High Country, as cold and snowy conditions persist into March despite a warm and dry February. As of March 14, Breckenridge has seen more than a foot of snow for the month, with more likely on the way. Breckenridge Ski Resort averages over 300 inches of snow each season, and according to the resort's website, current totals sit at 219 inches. We have some catching up to do to meet that average, but we could still see plenty of snow between now and May.

For the winter, this means we've had fewer powder days than we did in years that were at or above average snowfall. As the ski season fades into the rear-view mirror, the river rats that come out to play in spring and summer may find low and less-than-inspiring flows.

A good winter ski season usually means a good rafting season, too. And a low snow season means that not only will the flows be less exciting, some sections of river may not go at all, which affects both individual recreationists as well as small businesses and guides who rely on those rivers for income each summer. Seasons with high snow totals or warm springs that cause rapid snowmelt often mean exceptionally high water flow in rivers, which can make them dangerous and even cause flooding. Conversely, low snow years bring lower river flows, resulting in a shorter rafting season overall.

Our seasonal snowfall totals also directly impact our wildfire season. In summer 2020, Colorado saw its three largest wildfires in state history. By the end of May that same year, Breckenridge had received only 215 inches of its 300-inch seasonal average while the town Dillon saw barely more than 100 inches for the season.

The below-average snowfall paired with a warm and dry spring and summer sparked destructive wildfires across the state. Less snow contributes to a lower moisture content in the soil throughout the summer, meaning we're more likely to see big blazes. This means you can say goodbye to s'mores over the campfire, and you may have to hole up inside when the mountain valleys become socked in with wildfire smoke.

So even though Ullr Fest happened months ago, skiers, rafters, campers, ranchers and wildland firefighters should offer up another snow dance before the season is over. Winter isn't gone just yet, and a few more snowstorms mean a lot more than just a few more powder days.



Stasia Stockwell.

Jon Stockwell/Courtesy photo

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Stasia Stockwell is an avid backcountry skier who writes with the desire to connect readers from all backgrounds with nature in a meaningful way.

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