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City That Takes Rain in Stride Puts on Hip Boots

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

SEATTLE, Nov. 26 — For all the fame of the rain in this soggy city, conversations about climate often lead to local defensiveness: Seattle, which averages about 38 inches of rain annually, is far from the country's wettest big city. Atlanta, Boston, Houston, Miami and New York are just some of the others that get more rain.

The rain here has made its name mostly through persistence, not volume. It plays bass, not lead guitar. And not every complaint about precipitation involves wanting less.

"I hate mist, because mist is just a tease," said Alex Sloan, 17, waiting Saturday night for the Number 28 bus to take her home to the Broadview neighborhood after shopping downtown. "Thicker rain, I love it."

Her friend Lani Farley, 16, chimed in, "Yeah."

"If you're going to get wet," Lani said, "you might as well get soaking wet."

This month, Alex and Lani got their wish.

At midday on Sunday, near the end of what is typically Seattle's rainiest month, the official rain gauge at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport was well past 14 inches and rising, having mocked the November average of about 5.9 inches and smeared the previous single-month record documented at the airport, 12.92 inches, set in January 1953.

Storm after storm has slammed the Puget Sound region, riding warm air from southern parts of the Pacific Ocean.

Now some wonder whether the weather here might deliver the single-month record for rainfall since such data was first collected back in the 19th century. The mark, 15.33 inches, was set in December 1933, when the official rain gauge was downtown; the official gauge was moved to the airport in 1945.

With just four days left in November and colder, drier air in the forecast — snow, a rarity, dusted parts of the city on Sunday — chances for setting the record have diminished, but hope remains.

“The way I look at it, we might as well go all the way,” said Carl Cerniglia, a meteorologist at the [National Weather Service](#) in Seattle.

An inconsistency muddles the comparison of past and present puddles: usually, more rain falls at the airport than downtown. According to a National Weather Service calculation of data from one 27-year period, the airport received about 11 percent more rain than the downtown spot. So when 15.33 inches fell downtown in December 1933, the airport might well have received 17 inches.

One potential reason for the disparity is that the grand, damp Olympic Mountains to the west, home to a temperate rain forest, create a “rain shadow” that stops plenty of moisture before it can arrive in the city. The airport, however, is about 14 miles south of downtown.

This month’s rains have done extensive damage to a region accustomed to ducking but enduring. Flooding in November killed at least three people in the Northwest, destroyed or damaged hundreds of homes, forced evacuations, ruined farms and washed out roads.

Mount Rainier National Park, about 50 miles southeast of the Seattle region, has been closed since flooding damaged park roads and buildings and swept away a campground, Sunshine Point. Nearly 18 inches of rain fell in one 36-hour period, according to park officials, far more than hit Seattle.

“The mountain,” as Seattleites reverently refer to Mount Rainier — is pronounced “ray-near.” It is named for Rear Admiral Peter Rainier of the British Royal Navy, not the climate surrounding its 14,410-foot peak.

The weather is a constant topic of conversation, even among those who insist the rain “doesn’t bother me,” but this month’s drama has stirred discussions about long-term implications. Some models of [global warming](#) predict more extreme wet weather in future Northwest winters, and more extreme dry periods in the summer. Just as November has seen record-breaking rain, this summer was unusually dry and hot.

Six of the 10 wettest Novembers on record in Seattle have occurred in the last 16 years, according to the National Weather Service.

“We can’t attribute this particular rainy month to climate change,” said Nick Bond, a research meteorologist at the Joint Institute for the Study of the Atmosphere and Ocean at the [University of Washington](#). “But there is emerging evidence that this sort of thing is liable to happen more often in the future, so maybe it is a harbinger. We just don’t know.”

Mr. Bond noted that the current mess may have upsides, at least in the short term. A moist winter, he said, could deepen the snow pack in the Cascade Mountains, improving the skiing, the water supply and the power generation from rivers, and potentially smoothing the journey of salmon smolts that will ride the rivers to sea next year. Then again, the area is entering an El Niño weather pattern, potentially reducing

precipitation this winter.

Sunshine is abundant in the summer, a fact that is best kept a secret, locals commonly quip, to prevent even more outsiders from moving here. In the chorus of his song, “The View From Home,” Bryan Bowers, an Autoharpist who started out as a street musician in Seattle, sings:

“Out on the road we tell all the turkeys, yes, it’s always raining and the sun never shines.

“But all the natives know when the mountain lifts her skirts, the view from home will flat out melt your mind.”

On Saturday, after a Thanksgiving holiday that treated out-of-town visitors to the appropriate, off-putting dreariness, a “sun break” silhouetted Mount Rainier and later illuminated the snow-capped Olympics. The fat clouds that loomed did not keep hundreds of families from downtown for the Seattle Kids Marathon.

In a city where the population suffers disproportionately from Seasonal Affective Disorder, the rain is sometimes blamed, but the main culprit is winter darkness, not wetness, experts say. The dampness, a secondary cause, drives people indoors, away from sunlight. Exposure to natural light, even if it is filtered by clouds and moisture, is crucial.

“The main thing,” said David H. Avery, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington who has spent 15 years studying light therapy and winter depression, “is to try to get outside in spite of the rain.”

Mr. Bond, who commutes to work by bicycle every day regardless of the weather, said he has noticed a change in outlook this month among some of his friends.

“They’re just kind of complaining about how heavy the rains have been, even people who have been here a while,” he said. “I’m not too sympathetic. I like the rain. You can become a shut-in or something or you can just embrace it, almost.”

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