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FEATURED

Heat History: June sets record so far, but likely won't equal 1936 or 1988

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This 1988 photo shows how easy it was to jump over Minneopa Creek that summer. The creek had dried up due to the drought. File photo



It's early June and the streets of Mankato are mostly empty as people stay indoors to escape the relentless sun and heavy heat as the temperature climbs up to the mid-90s.

It is not 2021 — it is the summer of 1988, and a heat wave is coming through Mankato that would stay the entire summer.

“It was just hot,” Kent Thiesse, former Blue Earth County extension educator, said to the Free Press in 2001, recalling the record-hot summer. “I mean really hot. You’d open the car door, and it would just smack you.”

The heat wave arrived on May 28 when the local temperature hit 99 degrees. There would be 52 days that summer where temperatures were above 90 degrees. Rain was rare. The Department of Natural Resources would later say in a report that 1988 would be remembered as “The Year of the Drought.”

Kenny Blumenfield, senior climatologist for the State Climatology Office, said beating the 1988 record for the duration of intensely hot days would be an extraordinary feat.

It’s hard to predict what the remainder of this summer will look like, but it’s shaping up to be a hot one.

The first 10 days of June have been the hottest in recorded state history. What is getting climatologists talking is how intense the heat has been and how long it has lasted.

“Especially for how early in the season it is,” Blumenfield said.

The region is in moderate drought conditions due to the recent heat and lack of rain. Parts of Martin and Faribault counties have reached severe drought status, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

The Mankato region has been getting wetter over the past decade, but Blumenfield said Minnesota weather conditions bounce around and this could potentially be the year the area suffers a hot drought.

The longest heat wave

By late July of 1988, Mankato was trapped in a furnace as 22 mile-per-hour winds blew record-breaking 107 degree air through the city.

Air conditionings weren’t as commonplace at the time and local stores quickly sold out of window AC units as people tried to escape the heat.

Mike Hanson was a regular at these stores. As the public relations intern for the Minnesota Vikings, he was tasked with helping players attending training camp stay cool.

With the credit cards of players in his pocket, Hanson would run around town, trying to find any available air conditioning units. He was told not to come back to training camp until he had cool air with him.

“They know me at the store right now,” Hanson told The Free Press at the time. “I walked in with Scott Studwell and Anthony Carter’s credit cards, and they didn’t even ask me questions.”

Matt Waltermann couldn’t get away from the heat that summer. His days were spent delivering hot pizzas in a car with no air conditioning. Amid a late delivery run one evening, Waltermann drove past a bank sign at 1 a.m. that showed it was still 94 degrees outside.

A Minnesota State University student at the time, Waltermann wouldn’t find much relief after work, returning to a sweltering apartment without air conditioning.

“It made me think that I ought to work a little harder at school, you know,” he later told The Free Press of his living conditions.

The Dust Bowl era

The summer of 1988 was a hot one, but it wasn’t as bad as the deadly heat wave that occurred about 50 years earlier.

The year was 1936 and a relentless dry heat swept through the Midwest at a time when the country was still in the heart of the Great Depression. Temperatures reached 109 degrees on July 14 in St. Peter.

Air conditioning wasn’t around yet, cooling fans were limited and people slept outside to escape the heat trapped indoors.

Up to 900 people died in Minnesota that summer because of the hot temperatures. Local crops were scorched.

The state DNR reports that despite a warming trend over the past several decades, there hasn’t been a summer that hot and dry since. While this summer is getting off to a hot start, Blumenfield said that what made the summers of 1988 and 1936 so bad is that the region was already in a

severe drought before the heat arrived.



[Drought worsens across southern Minnesota](#)

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