January 2026 Climate Summary

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January packed a season's worth of weather into 31 days — record warmth, soaking rain, drought relief, and a late-month Arctic surge.

- Second consecutive colder-than-normal month.
- First wetter-than-average month since last July.
- Late-month cold boosted lake ice.

A 102-Degree Temperature Swing

With brief early-spring warmth and one of the coldest Arctic outbreaks in recent years, January delivered quite the winter whiplash (Figure 1).

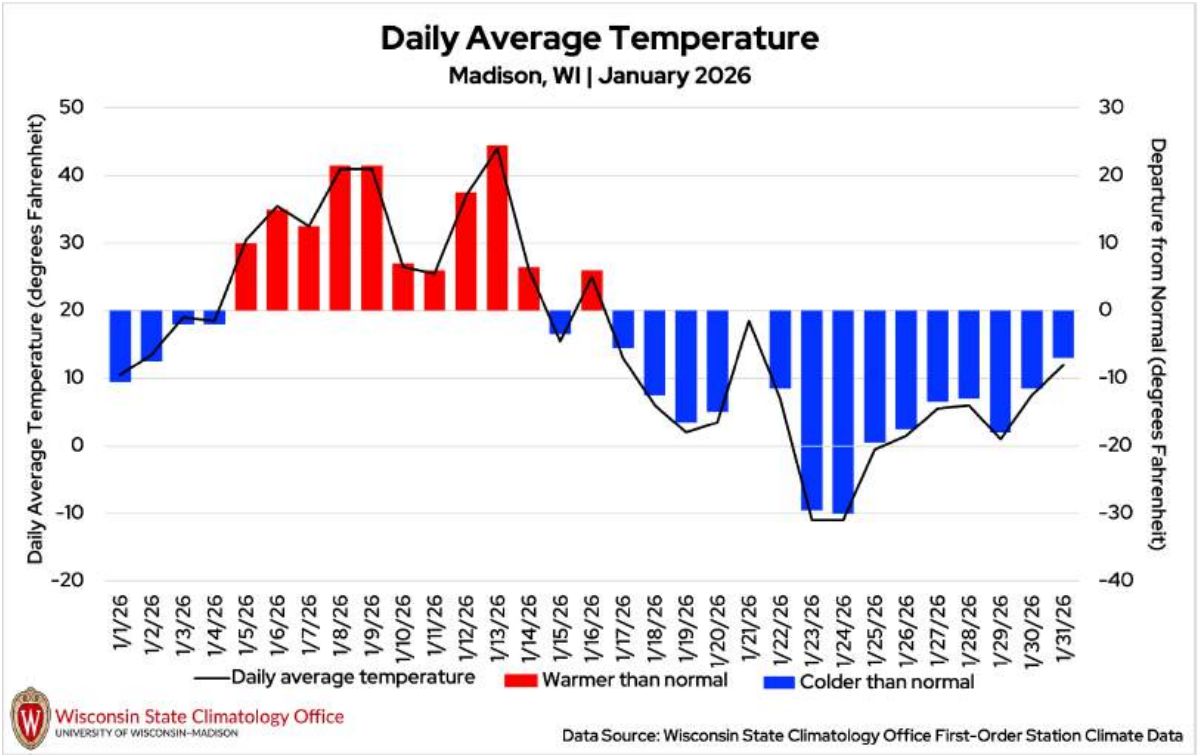

Figure 1. Daily average temperature (black line) and its departure from normal (red and blue bars) in degrees Fahrenheit for January at the Dane County Regional Airport (Dane County). Madison (and the rest of Wisconsin) saw extremes on both ends of the spectrum – from over 20 degrees warmer than normal early in the month to nearly 30 degrees colder than normal later on. Data come from the State Climatology Office's First-Order Station Climate Data.

The month began on a chilly note, with the first few days averaging five to 10 degrees colder than normal.

Temperatures then climbed, culminating in exceptional warmth by mid-month. Multiple daily temperature records were tied or broken. Milwaukee reached 59 degrees on January 9, shattering its 2002 record by five degrees. On January 13, Madison tied the old record high of 53 degrees (previously set in 1961). La Crosse recorded a daily warm low of 36 degrees, surpassing the old record of 34 degrees set in 1960.

That taste of spring was short-lived, however. By January 19, sub-zero temperatures were widespread, with wind chills dipping below minus 30 degrees.

The cold intensified from January 22 through 25, as Arctic air settled firmly over the region. Eau Claire, Wausau, Madison, and Green Bay spent 60 or more consecutive hours below zero — Wausau's fourth-longest such stretch on record. Wind chills of minus 40 to 50 degrees or colder were felt by many. Rhinelander saw its coldest wind chill on record — a bone-chilling minus 56 degrees.

Mother Nature refused to let up through the end of the month. Five of Wisconsin's six first-order stations saw 15 days straight with sub-freezing temperatures, and Wausau logged 17 such days. Wausau also endured 325 hours with sub-zero wind chills, the third-longest stretch on record for January.

Undoubtedly, Wisconsinites faced a plethora of impacts during this cold snap, and one such impact was increased heating needs.

Natural gas and electrical utilities rely on heating degree-day units (HDDUs) to anticipate their customers' energy demand. When the average daily temperature is below 65 degrees, HDDUs accumulate.

This year, Wisconsin accumulated 1,556 HDDUs — 102 more than normal — indicating that heating demand was roughly seven percent higher than normal due to colder-than-normal temperatures.

Looking at January's extremes, the state experienced a striking 102-degree temperature range. The warmest reading was a balmy 60 degrees seen in Union Grove and Racine (Racine County) on January 9 and 10, respectively. Meanwhile, the coldest temperature came on January 24, when the Wisconet station at Knight (Iron County) plunged to a brutal 41.6 degrees below zero.

While January's temperature range has varied widely — from 113 degrees to 64 degrees — going back to 1885, only 18 other years have seen a range of 100 degrees or more — just two since 2000.

Although the mid-to-late month chill felt extraordinary, this period is historically when Wisconsin sees its lowest temperatures (Figure 2).

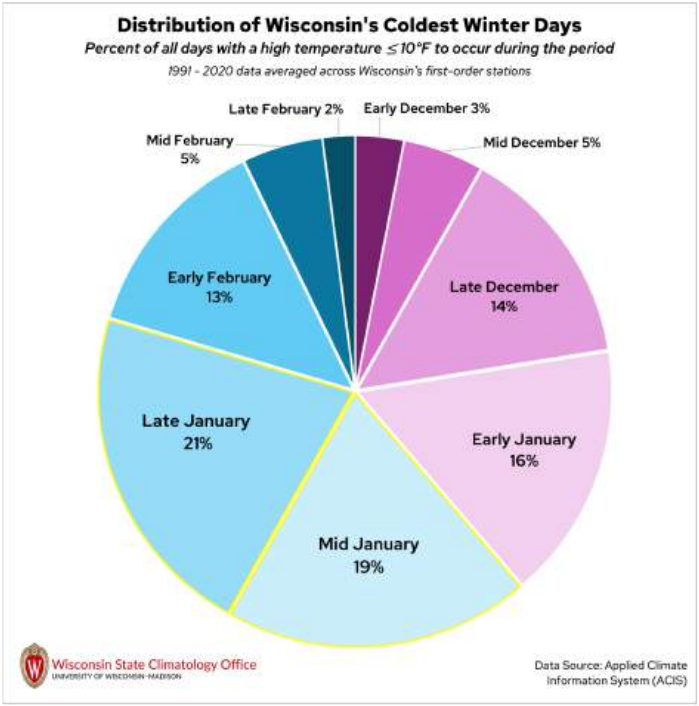

Figure 2. Wisconsin's distribution of all days with a high temperature less than or equal to 10 degrees Fahrenheit, averaged between 1991 and 2020 at Wisconsin's first-order stations. More than half of all very cold days in Wisconsin occur in January: 16 percent in early January (January 1 to 10), 19 percent in mid

January (January 11 to 20), and 21 percent in late January (January 21 to 31). Data are from the Applied Climate Information System.

If 2026 follows that pattern, minus 41.6 degrees may stand as the coldest temperature of the entire year. Since 2000, there have only been four years in which Wisconsin's coldest temperature of the entire year dropped to minus 40 or colder, underscoring how rare this level of cold has become.

Amid the extremes, January averaged 12 degrees statewide, 3.3 degrees colder than normal — the second colder-than-normal month in a row (Figures 3 and 4). Together, December and January marked Wisconsin's coldest back-to-back months compared to normal since January and February 2022.

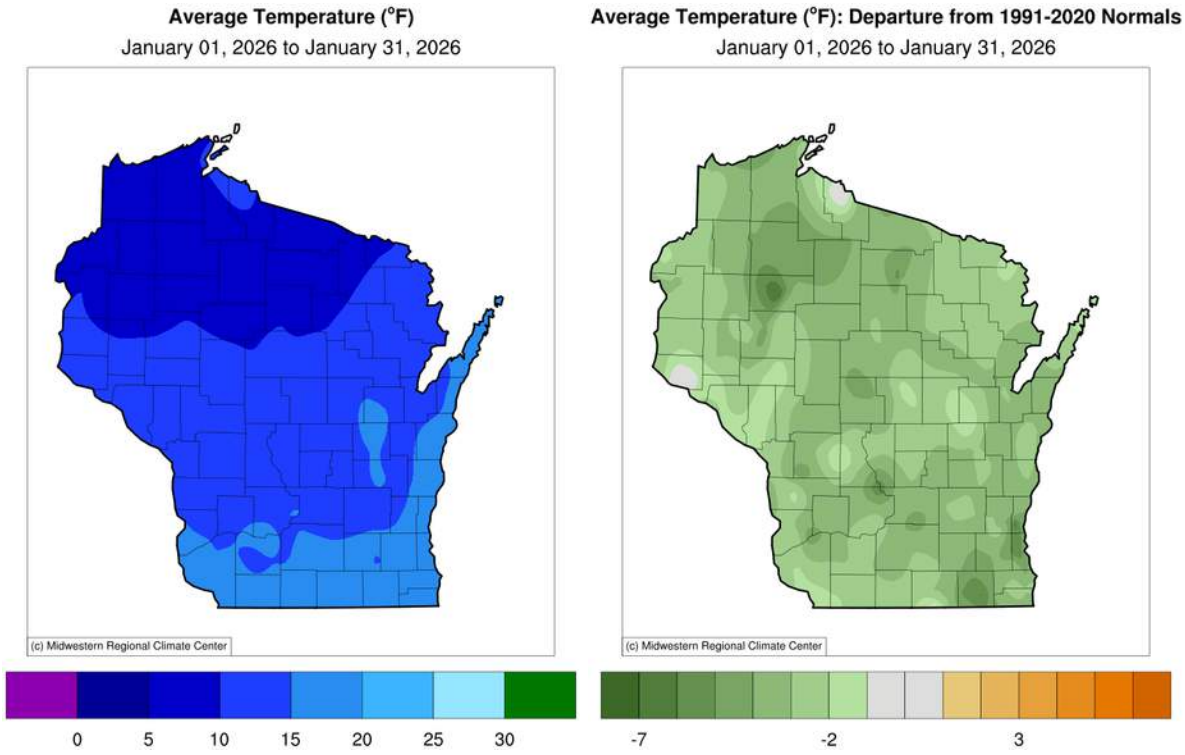

Figure 3 (left). January average temperature in degrees Fahrenheit. Average temperatures ranged from five to 10 degrees across much of northern Wisconsin to 15 to 20 degrees across southern and far eastern Wisconsin.

Figure 3 (right). January average temperature departure from normal. Most of the state averaged two to four degrees colder than normal.

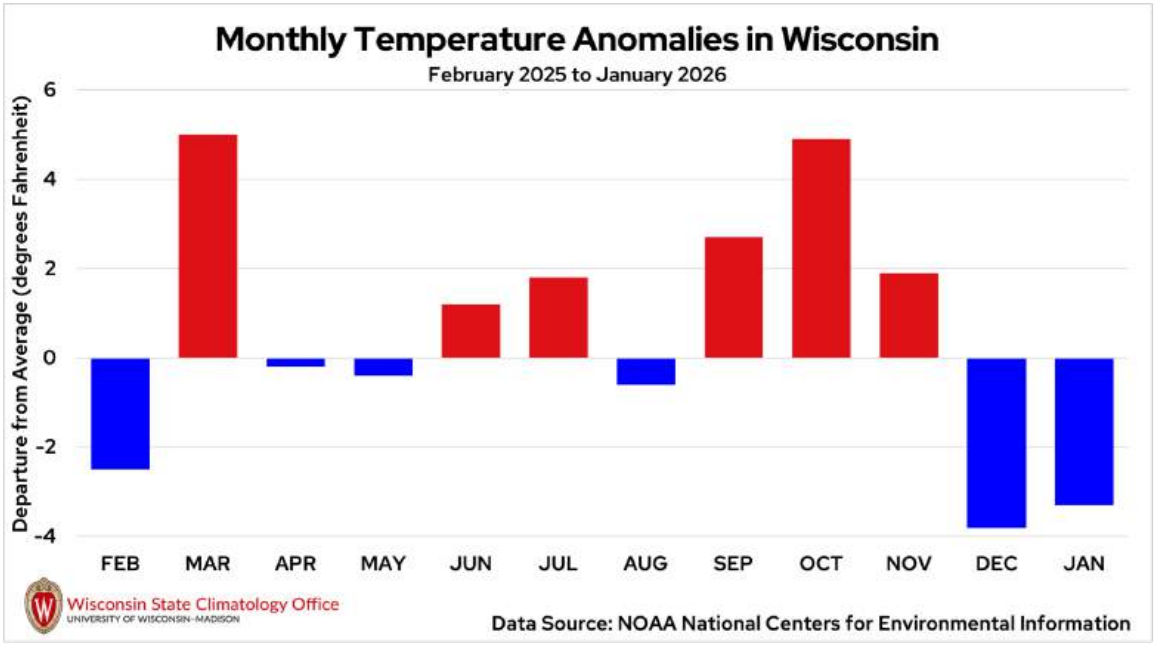

Figure 4. Monthly statewide average temperature anomalies in degrees Fahrenheit for Wisconsin between February 2025 and January 2026 compared to the 1991 to 2020 average. Temperature anomalies are from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information.

January Showers

January was a wet month for most of Wisconsin, but not with the type of precipitation one would typically expect during the coldest month of the year. Early-month warmth led to rounds of rainshowers rather than snowshowers. Overall, January was 0.27 inches wetter than average, with a statewide average total of 1.48 inches (Figure 5).

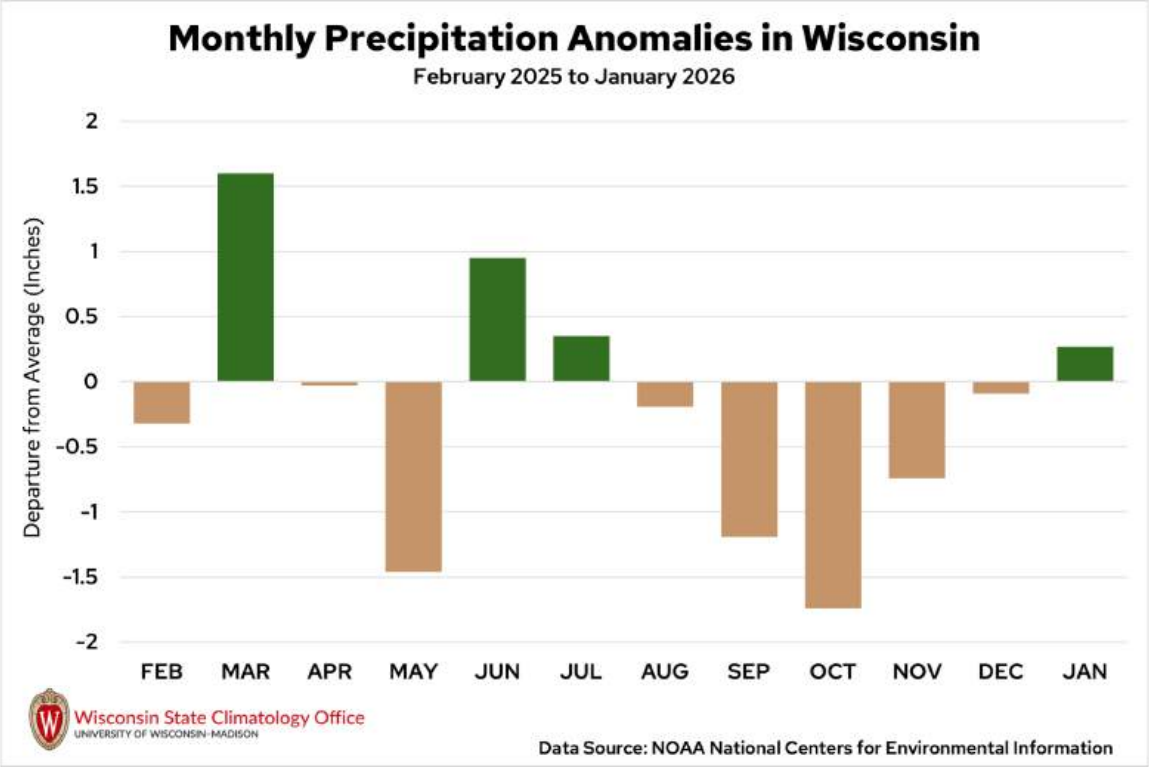

Figure 5. Monthly statewide average precipitation anomalies in inches for Wisconsin between February 2025 and January 2026 compared to the 1991 to 2020 average. Precipitation anomalies are from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information.

Rounds of light showers on the morning of January 6 turned roads to ice in parts of central Wisconsin. Some schools opted for a two-hour delay due to poor road conditions. Rain totals were between a quarter and a half inch, and ice accumulation up to a tenth of an inch was seen.

On the eighth of the month, an unusually warm January weather system brought heavy rain to the state. In anticipation of the rain, the National Weather Service in Green Bay issued a flood watch – the first to be issued in Wisconsin in January since 2013.

A swath of one to two inches of rain stretched from the southwest to the northeast. Daily rainfall records were set in La Crosse (0.96 inches) and Wausau (0.78 inches). These totals nearly doubled the previous January 8 precipitation records that were set in 1937 in both cities.

While these rain totals may not seem significant compared to rain totals seen in summer months, January is typically Wisconsin's driest month. Between January 8 and 9, Wausau received 104 percent of its average January precipitation, while La Crosse received 94 percent (Figure 6).

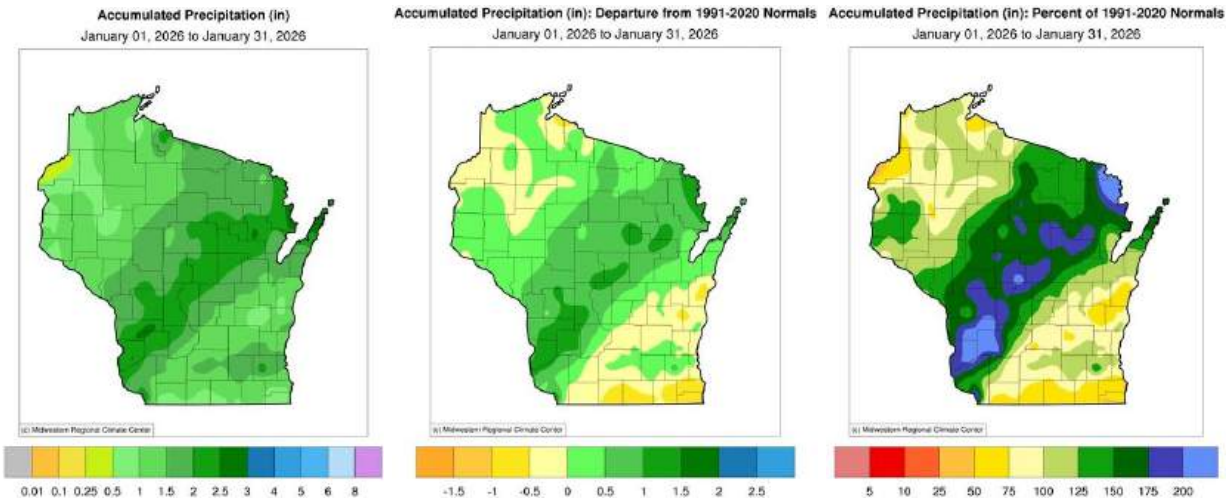

Figure 6 (left). January accumulated total precipitation in inches. A swath of accumulation over 1.5 inches was seen from southwest Wisconsin to the northeast.

Figure 6 (middle). January precipitation departure from average, where the northwest and southeast regions were a half to an inch drier than normal. The rest of the state saw wetter than average conditions.

Figure 6 (right). January precipitation percent of normal, highlighting 150 to 200 percent of normal precipitation from the southwest to northeast, largely from the January 8 rain event.

Cooler temperatures through the rest of the month allowed for snow rather than rain, though no major storms impacted the state.

A band of snow developed behind a cold front on January 17 and produced incredibly fluffy snow in southern Wisconsin. A typical snow-to-liquid ratio in Wisconsin is 13 to one – 13 inches of snow equals one inch of liquid precipitation. A lower snow ratio produces heavy, wet snow that's good for snowballs. The snow ratio for this event was 60 to one, so this snow was light as a feather!

Fluffier snow accumulates more quickly as it doesn't compact as it falls. As a result, Madison set a new daily snowfall record of 5.6 inches, breaking the previous record of 5.0 inches on January 17, 1953.

Throughout the month, snowpack was persistent across the northern half of Wisconsin. For the southern half of the state, the snow began to fade by mid-month due to warm temperatures and rainfall (Figure 7).

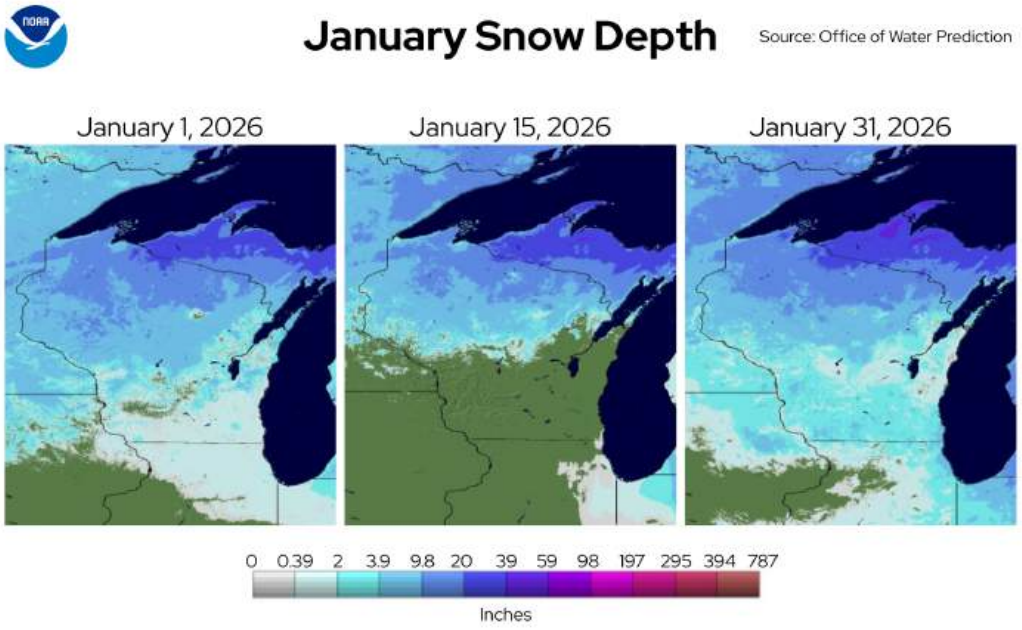

Figure 7. Wisconsin snow depth analysis through January 2026, showing a decrease in snowpack mid-month. Images come from the NOAA National Operational Hydrologic Remote Sensing Center.

Additional small snow systems through the end of the month helped rebuild the pack, adding a few inches here and there, but did little to deepen it (Figure 8).

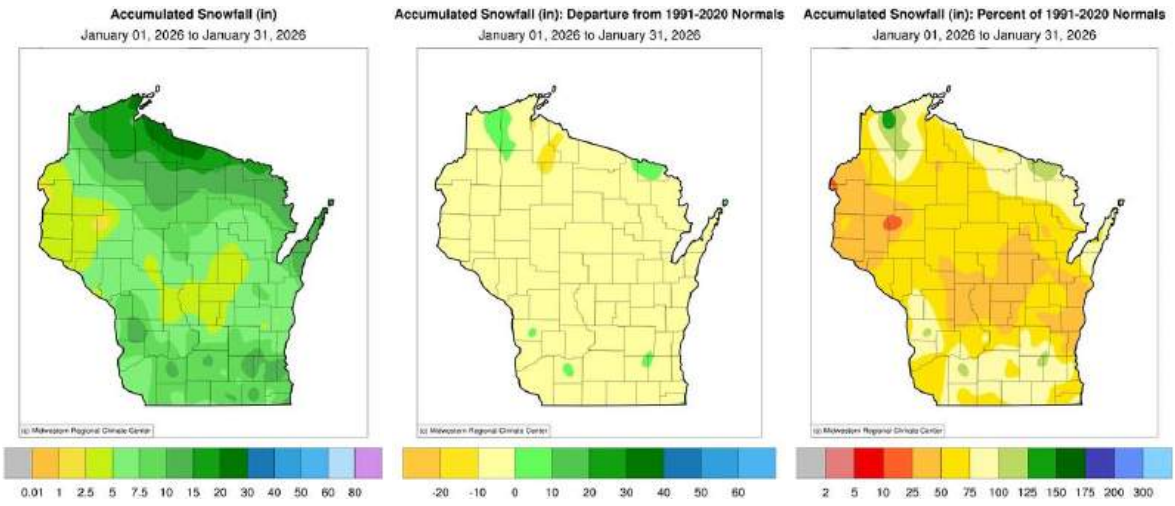

Figure 8 (left). January total accumulated snowfall in inches, where most of the state received between five and 10 inches. Higher totals were common in far northern counties.

Figure 8 (middle). January accumulated snowfall departure from normal. Nearly the entire state saw up to 10 fewer inches of snow than normal.

Figure 8 (right). January accumulated snowfall percent of normal. Counties across central Wisconsin received 25 to 75 percent of normal January snow. A small portion of Douglas County saw 125 percent of normal snowfall.

Drought Abates

Drought conditions from the fall season persisted in Wisconsin through the beginning of January. However, mid-month warmth allowed melted snow and rainfall to seep into thawed soils, alleviating some of the dryness.

A large reduction in severe drought (D2) was seen in northeastern Wisconsin. Areas of abnormal dryness (D0) shrank substantially in western, central, and southern counties (Figure 9).

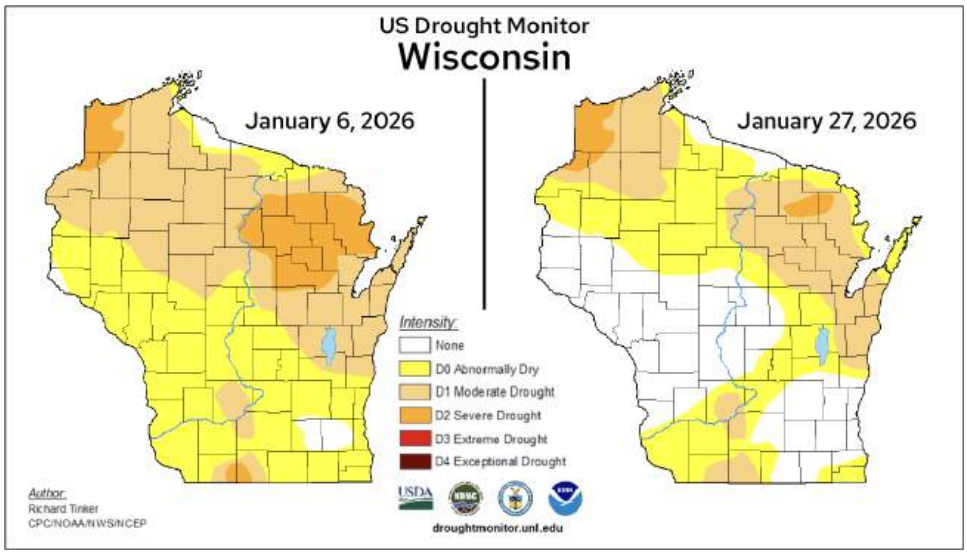

Figure 9. U.S. Drought Monitor conditions in Wisconsin as of January 6 and January 27, 2026, showing a large reduction in severe drought in northeastern Wisconsin and a substantial shrinking of drought in western, central, and southern counties.

Despite the state having entered the winter season with the driest conditions since 2012, January's precipitation brought Wisconsin's Drought Severity and Coverage Index

(DSCI) to the lowest it's been in the past two winter seasons (Figure 10). This also goes to show how dry the previous two winter seasons have been.

If this trend continues in February, Wisconsin could begin the spring growing season with promising soil moisture.

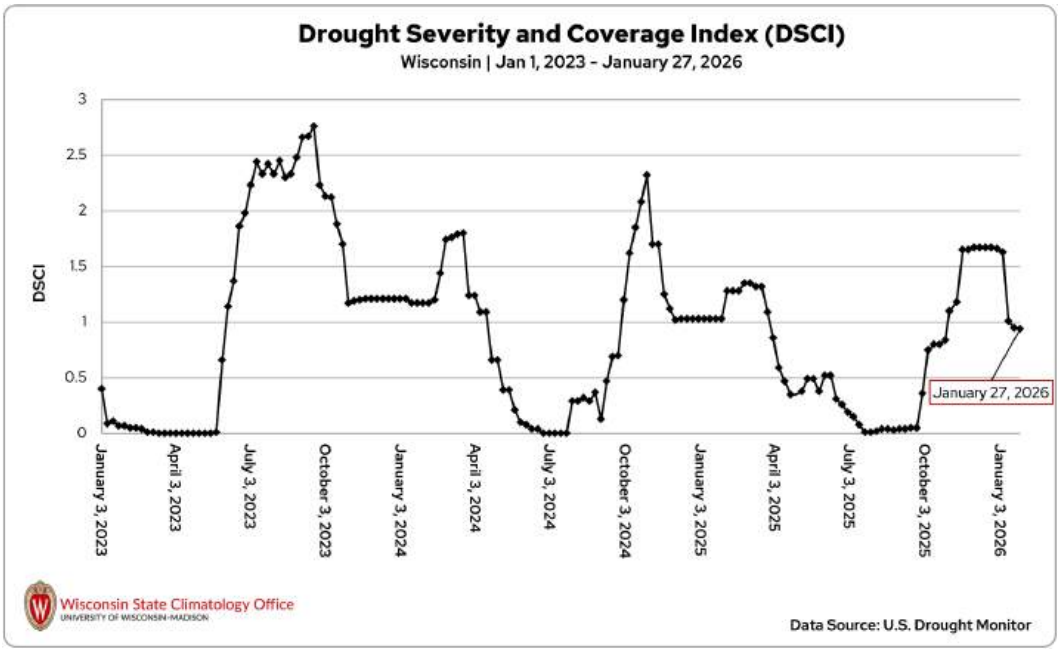

Figure 10. The Drought Severity and Coverage Index (DSCI) for Wisconsin from January 1, 2023, through January 27, 2026. Statistics come from the U.S. Drought Monitor. A significant drop in DSCI was seen during mid-January, following heavy rainfall.

Lake Ice

January's temperature swings were reflected on Wisconsin's lakes. Lake Mendota was officially declared closed on New Year's Day, but by mid-month, above-freezing temperatures and strong winds were threatening ice cover.

Nonetheless, clear, cold, and calm nights meant none of Madison's three lakes officially opened. Once temperatures turned consistently sub-freezing, ice cover strengthened. By late January, reports indicated around a foot of ice on Lake Mendota near the Edgewater Hotel.

Across the Great Lakes, ice cover followed a similar pattern. At the start of January, about 10 percent of the lakes were ice-covered — near average — before dipping to six percent by January 14. As Arctic air arrived later in the month, ice cover surged — most notably on Lake Erie, which jumped from two to 95 percent ice-covered between January 14 and 31. Overall, the Great Lakes finished January 52 percent ice-covered, well above average (Figure 11).

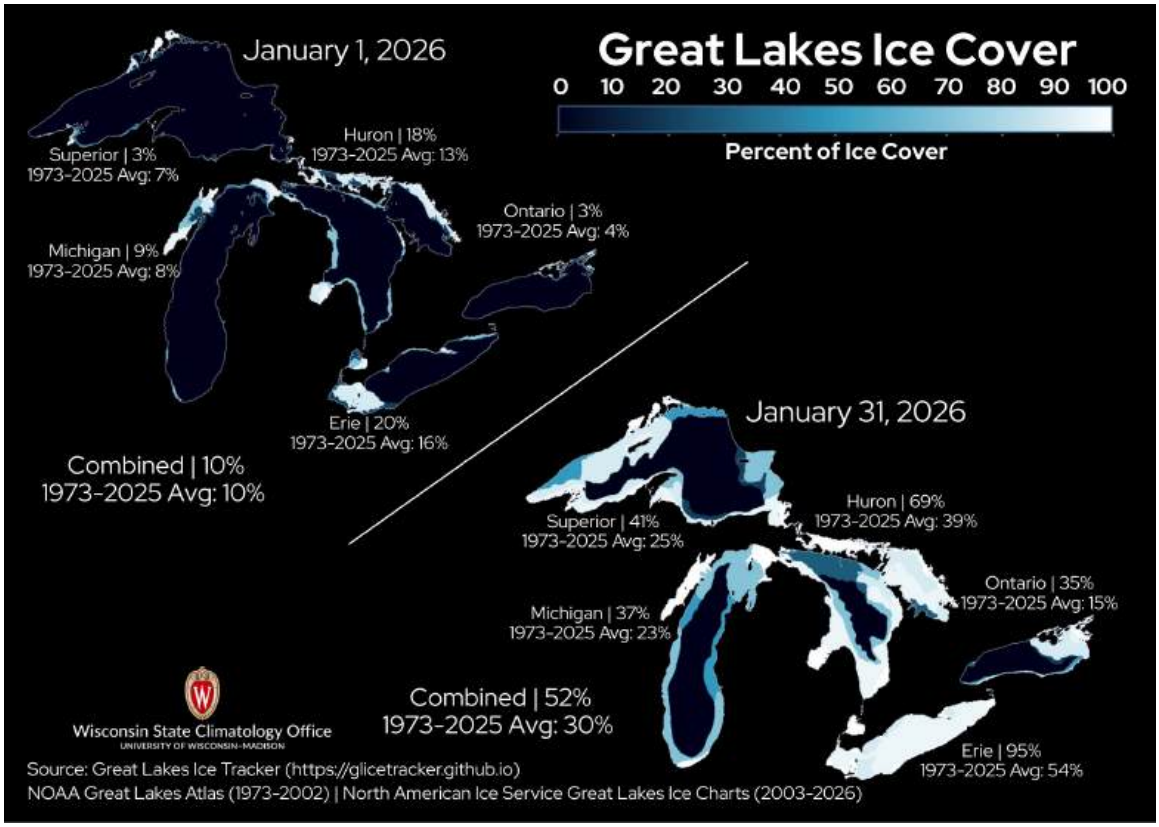

Figure 11. Percentage of the Great Lakes covered in ice on January 1 and 31, 2026. Among all the lakes, ice cover was near normal at the start of the month. From mid-to-late January, ice cover skyrocketed. Maps and statistics come from the Great Lakes Ice Tracker.

Climate Corner

Over the last 142 years, nearly half of the Badger State's coldest temperatures have occurred in January. As we saw in January 2026, cold Arctic air masses drifting southward can create some of the state's most frigid conditions.

Dive into the records of Wisconsin's most extreme cold temperatures in this month's Climate Ed-ucation blog.

Climate Stats by Division

Temperature (degrees Fahrenheit)

	January 2026	
Division	**Avg**	**Dept**
Northwest	8.7	-3.3
North Central	8.6	-3.9
Northeast	11.2	-3.3
West Central	12.0	-2.9
Central	13.2	-3.1
East Central	15.3	-2.9
Southwest	15.4	-2.7
South Central	16.0	-3.1
Southeast	17.0	-3.7
State	12.0	-3.3

Record Coolest
Bottom 1/10
Bottom 1/3
Normal
Top 1/3
Top 1/10
Record Warmest

Liquid-Equivalent Precipitation (inches)

	January 2026		Since Nov. 1, 2025	
Division	**Avg**	**Dept**	**Avg**	**Dept**

Record Driest
Bottom 1/10
Bottom 1/3

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Northwest	0.84	-0.13	3.50	-0.61
North Central	1.69	0.48	4.82	0.15
Northeast	1.95	0.72	4.55	-0.20
West Central	1.36	0.30	4.03	-0.19
Central	1.78	0.60	4.25	-0.38
East Central	1.53	0.08	4.20	-1.03
Southwest	1.84	0.59	4.04	-0.98
South Central	1.17	-0.26	3.75	-1.67
Southeast	1.32	-0.32	4.57	-1.21
State	1.48	0.27	4.18	-0.54

Normal
Top 1/3
Top 1/10
Record Wettest

Snowfall (inches)

	January 2026	
Division	**Avg**	**Dept**
Northwest	11.8	-0.8
North Central	13.6	-3.8
Northeast	8.8	-5.1
West Central	5.8	-5.4
Central	6.4	-5.5
East Central	7.1	-6.4
Southwest	7.8	-3.5

Below Normal
Normal
Above Normal

South Central	8.9	-2.6
Southeast	9.5	-3.1
State	9.5	-3.7

Table 1. January climate statistics by Wisconsin's climate division, including average temperature in degrees Fahrenheit, liquid-equivalent precipitation (rain plus melted snow) in inches, and snowfall in inches. "Avg" indicates the observed average. "Dept" indicates the departure from the 1991 to 2020 normal. Positive departures reflect above-normal conditions, while negative departures mean below-normal conditions. The shading for temperature and liquid-equivalent precipitation depicts the rank from coolest to warmest and driest to wettest, respectively, for the entire period of record (1895 to 2026). The shading for snowfall depicts whether snowfall was above or below normal and is not based on rankings. The temperature and precipitation statistics come from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information Climate at a Glance Tool. The snowfall statistics come from the State Climatology Office's statewide and divisional 12-month averages.

Monthly, seasonal, and annual temperature and precipitation values and rankings published in this report are from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information at the time of posting this climate summary. Values and rankings can change after publishing our climate summaries. To check the most recent values and rankings, visit NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information Climate at a Glance Tool.

This report is a product of the Wisconsin State Climatology Office. For questions and comments, please contact us by email (stclim@aos.wisc.edu) or phone (608-263-2374).