May & Spring 2026 Climate Summary

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Following a dramatic start to spring that included a historic blizzard, record-setting rainfall, and severe weather, May featured stark changes. Wisconsin rapidly shifted to extreme dryness, early summer heat, and quieter weather:

- Frost risk to 90-degree heat
- Ties as Wisconsin's fourth driest May on record
- Dry conditions return

Chilly Start to Warm Finish

May was another month of noticeable temperature swings in Wisconsin, beginning with a taste of late winter and ending with a preview of summer.

The first half of May was notably chilly, with statewide temperatures averaging nearly five degrees below normal between May 1 and 15. Widespread freezes affected much of the state on multiple mornings, with temperatures dipping as low as 20 degrees the morning of May 2 in Rhinelander (Oneida County) and Eagle River (Vilas County).

Several locations also challenged or tied daily temperature records, including Rhinelander, which set a new daily record low of 21 degrees on May 11.

Following this early-month cold snap, the 32-degree freeze season came to a close across Wisconsin's six first-order stations. In Wausau and Eau Claire, this was exactly in line with the 1950 to 2025 average. In Madison, Green Bay, and La Crosse, the last freezes were a few days later than average. Conversely, Milwaukee saw its last freeze a full week earlier than average (Table 1).

Location	2026 Last Freeze (as of May 31)	Average Last Freeze (1950-2025)	Latest Last Freeze (1950-2025)
Milwaukee	April 20	April 27	May 31
Madison	May 7	May 2	June 1
La Crosse	May 7	May 3	May 30
Green Bay	May 11	May 7	May 30
Wausau	May 11	May 11	June 12
Eau Claire	May 11	May 11	June 12

Table 1. The last 32-degree freezes as of May 31, 2026, at Wisconsin's six first-order stations compared to their 1950 to 2025 averages and their latest final freezes on record between 1950 and 2025. The last freeze dates for 2026 are for individual stations; data from the State Climatology Office's first-order station webpage. The average and latest final freeze data are averaged across counties; data from the Midwestern Regional Climate Center's Freeze Date Tool.

By mid-month, however, the script was flipped. Temperatures surged to an average of 3.5 degrees warmer than normal across the state. The contrast was especially striking in the final week of May, when over 40 stations reached 90 degrees. Many of these 90-degree readings occurred on May 26 across central and northern Wisconsin, which is earlier than normal for most locations (Table 2).

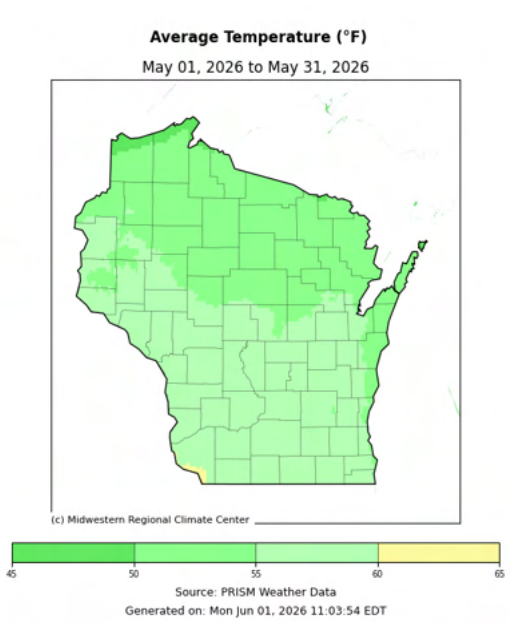
Location	First ≥ 90°F Occurrence of 2026	Average First ≥ 90°F Occurrence (1991-2020)
La Crosse	May 26	May 26
Eau Claire	May 26	June 6
Milwaukee	–	June 13
Madison	–	June 26
Wausau	May 26	June 26
Green Bay	May 26	June 30

Table 2. The first 90-degree or hotter occurrences in 2026 at four of Wisconsin's six first-order stations compared to their 1991 to 2020 normals. Data from the Applied Climate Information System.

The warmest temperature observed was a warm 92 degrees, recorded in multiple locations, including Black River Falls (Jackson County) and the Wautoma Municipal Airport (Waushara County) on May 26.

However, even though we saw some incredibly warm days in the latter half of the month, the nighttime temperatures continued to remain generally low. Frost advisories were issued for parts of the state around May 19 and 20, and Ashland (Ashland County) even tied its daily record low temperature of 27 degrees on May 21. Through the last week of the month, areas in northern Wisconsin and even along the Door Peninsula recorded low temperatures in the thirties.

Despite the dramatic ups and downs, Wisconsin's average temperature for May was 54.9 degrees, just a half a degree below normal (Figures 1 and 2).



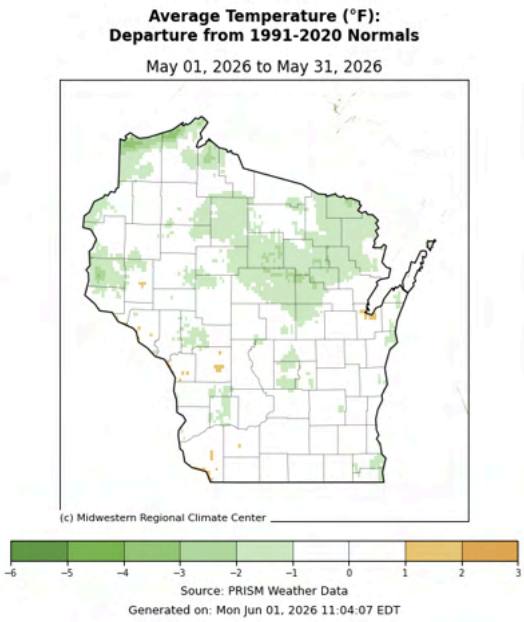


Figure 1 (left). May average temperature in degrees Fahrenheit. Average temperatures ranged from 50 to 55 degrees across much of northern and far eastern Wisconsin to 55 to 60 degrees across much of central to southern Wisconsin.

Figure 1 (right). May average temperature departure from normal. Most of the state averaged within one degree of the 1991 to 2020 normal. Scattered areas around the state – mostly in the northern half of the state – averaged one to two degrees below normal.

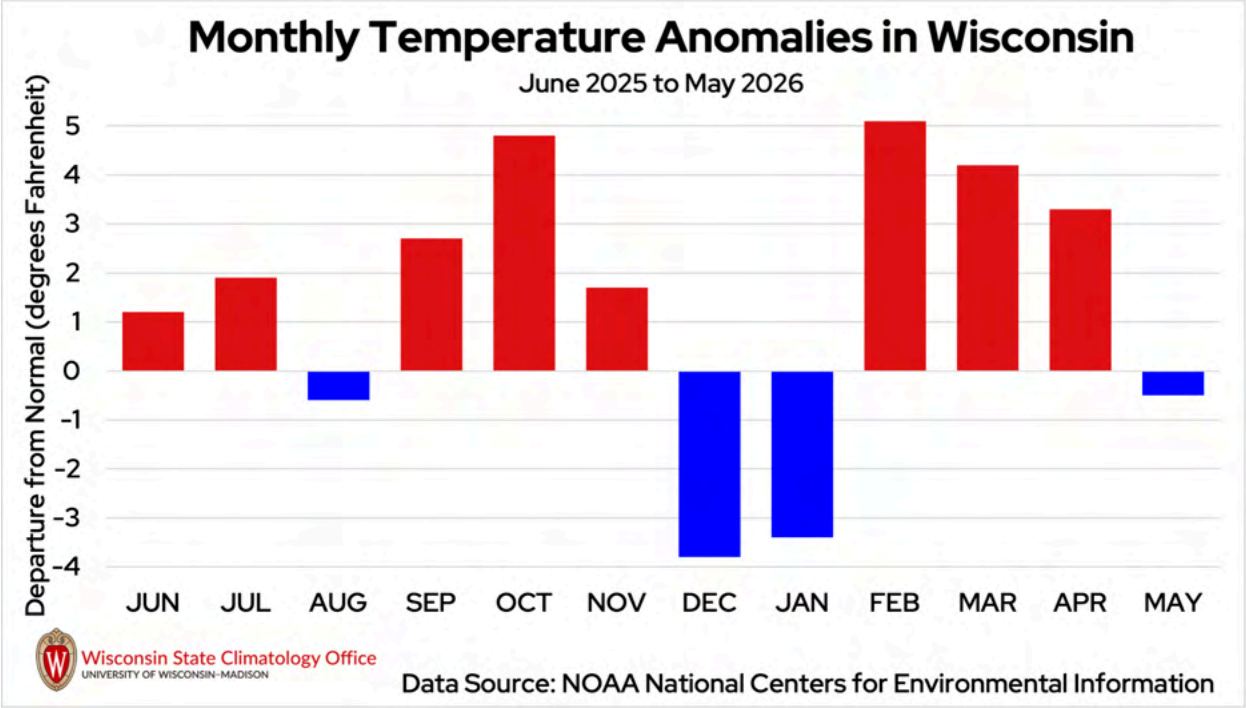


Figure 2. Monthly statewide temperature anomalies in degrees Fahrenheit for Wisconsin between June 2025 and May 2026 compared to the 1991 to 2020 normal. Temperature anomalies are from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information.

Spring as a whole averaged 45.3 degrees – 2.3 degrees warmer than normal – tying 2016 for the eighteenth warmest spring in 132 years. While the season ultimately finished on the warm side, it was far from steady. Large temperature swings occurred during each month, including a remarkable cold snap in mid-March and summerlike heat in April and May (Figure 3).

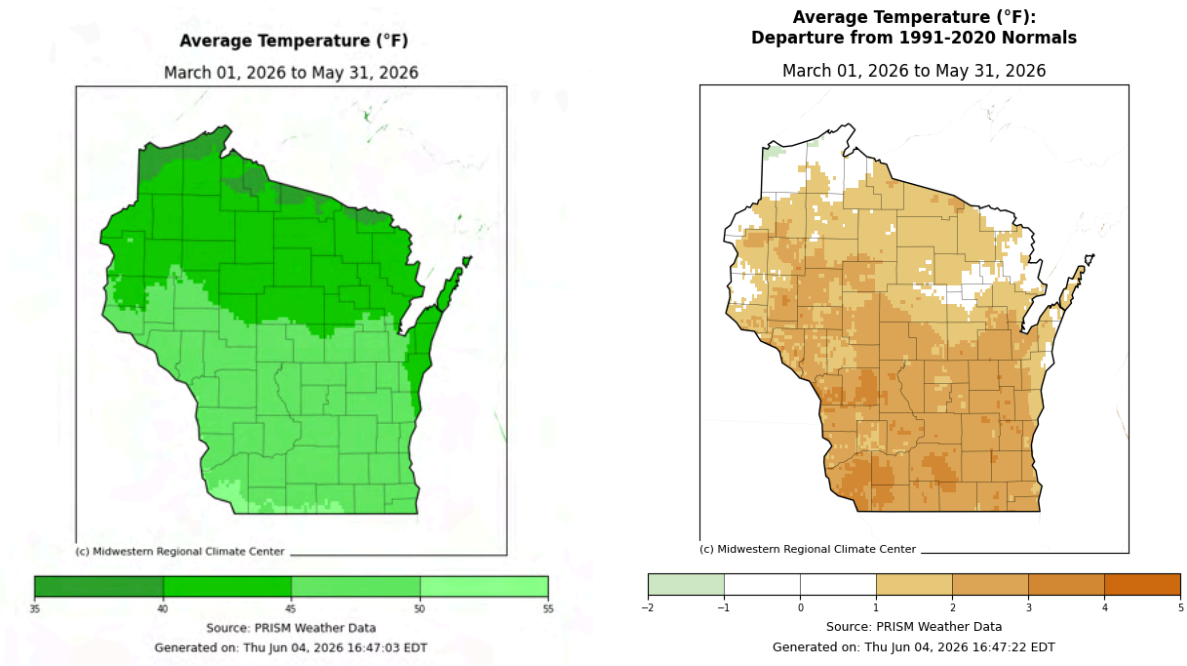


Figure 3 (left). Spring average temperature in degrees Fahrenheit. Average temperatures ranged from 35 to 45 degrees across the northern half of the state and into far east-central Wisconsin, to 45 to 55 degrees across the southern half of the state.

Figure 3 (right). Spring average temperature departure from normal. Much of the state averaged one to three degrees warmer than the 1991 to 2020 normal, with the largest departures of three to four degrees mostly concentrated in west-central to southwestern Wisconsin. Areas in northern Wisconsin and in the Door Peninsula averaged within one degree of normal.

Precipitation Ping-Pong

After experiencing its wettest April on record, Wisconsin flipped to one of its driest Mays ever observed. The state averaged only 1.61 inches of precipitation the whole month – 2.32 inches below normal – tied with 2023 as Wisconsin's fourth driest May on record (Figure 4).

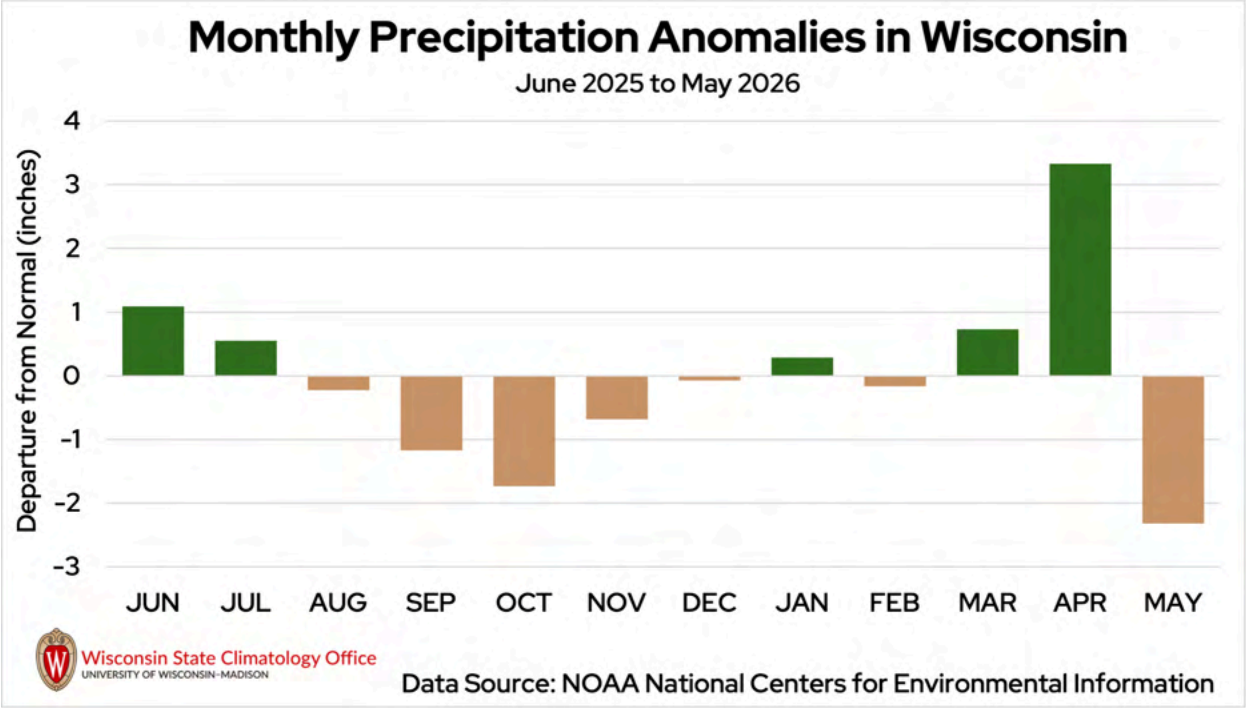


Figure 4. Monthly statewide average precipitation anomalies in inches for Wisconsin between June 2025 and May 2026 compared to the 1991 to 2020 normal. Precipitation anomalies are from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information.

Milwaukee experienced perhaps the most remarkable turnaround. Following its wettest April on record with 9.49 inches of precipitation, Brew City received only 0.36 inches throughout the entire month, setting a new record for its driest May. The previous May record of 0.41 inches had stood since 1885.

This is such an incredible feat that, in examining the records at each of Wisconsin's six first-order stations going back to the early 1900s, there is no previous occurrence of a record-wet month immediately followed by a record-dry month or vice versa.

Janesville (at the Wastewater Treatment Plant in Rock County) had a similar turnaround, from a record April high of 10.55 inches to a record-low 0.47 inches in May.

The dryness was not limited to southern Wisconsin. Much of the state saw little rainfall during the month. The La Crosse Regional Airport and the Chippewa Valley Regional Airport recorded their fourth and seventh driest Mays on record, respectively.

Large patches across southeastern, west-central, and northeastern Wisconsin saw less than 25 percent of their normal May precipitation. Much of the rest of the state received between 25 and 75 percent of normal (Figure 5).

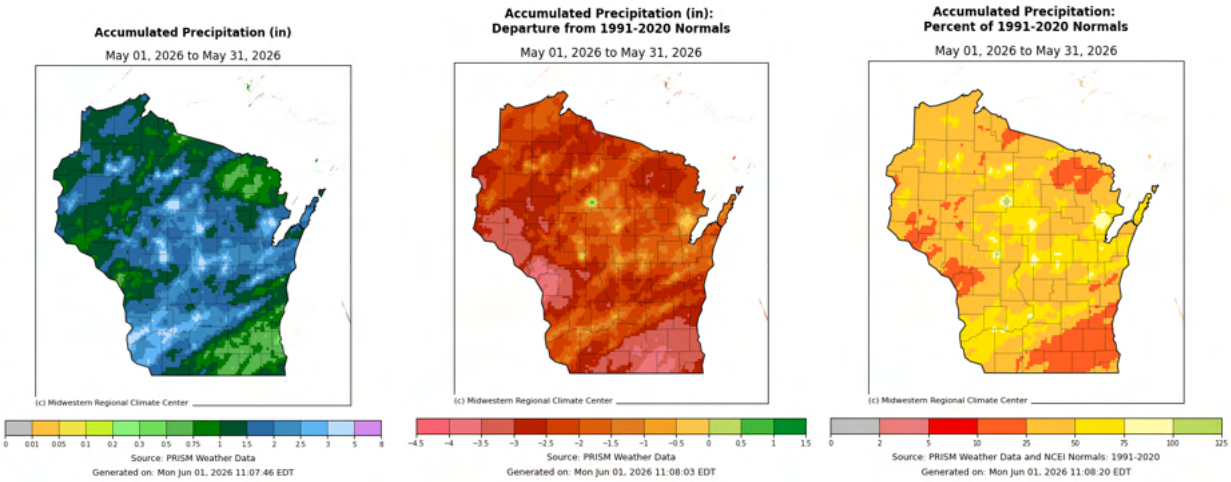


Figure 5 (left). May accumulated total precipitation in inches. Southwestern, central, and east-central Wisconsin, as well as parts of the far northwestern region, mostly saw 1.5 to 2.5 inches of precipitation, but some areas saw upwards of five inches. Southeastern, west-central, and areas of northern Wisconsin saw less than an inch and a half of precipitation.

Figure 5 (middle). May precipitation departure from normal. Nearly the entire state received below-normal precipitation for the month. Only two small areas of Taylor and Jackson Counties reported above-normal precipitation.

Figure 5 (right). May precipitation percent of normal, highlighting how significantly dry the month was. Almost the entire state reported less than 75 percent of normal May precipitation, with large patches of 25 percent of normal in southeastern, west-central, and northern areas.

While a handful of rain events brought temporary relief – including scattered showers across most of the state on the 12th, locally heavy downpours in Dane County on the 17th, and a few more drops between the last week of the month – most areas never came close to erasing their month-long deficits.

Concerns shifted dramatically from flooding in early May to the potential for drought development heading into summer. The one-two punch of April 2026 to May 2026 clearly articulates the precipitation ping-pong pattern we've been facing recently in Wisconsin (Figure 6).

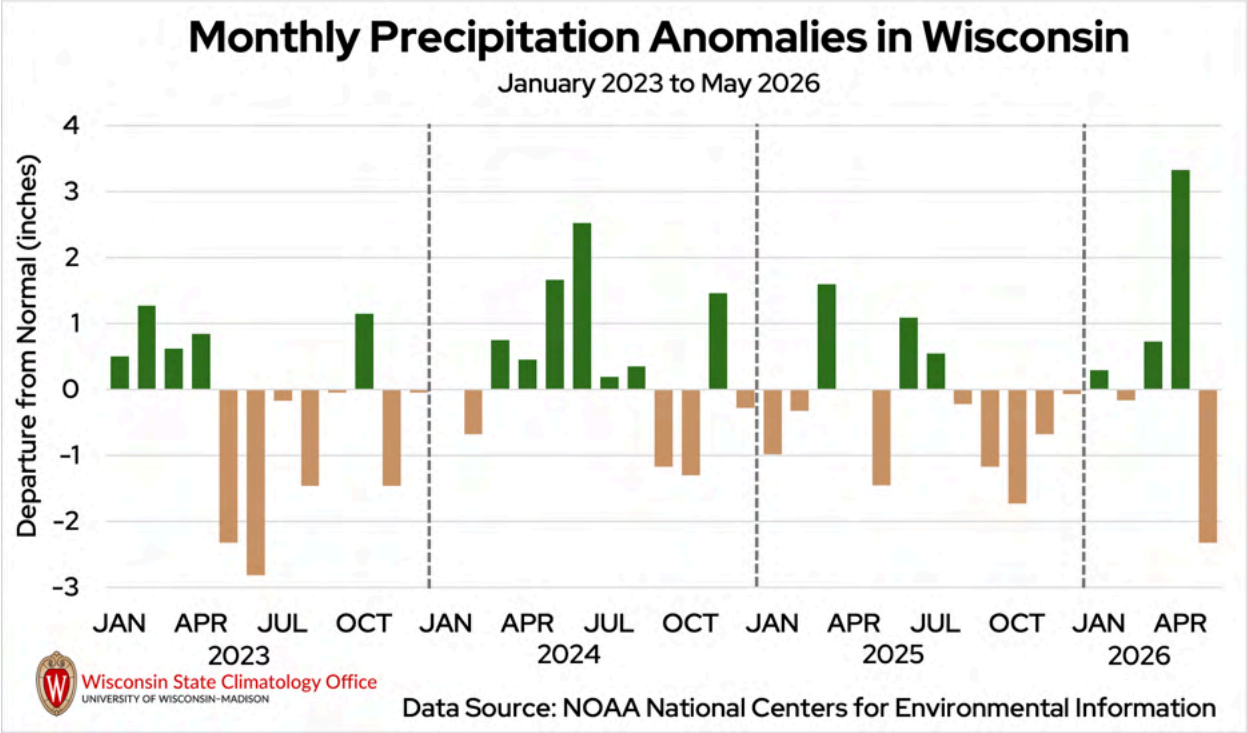


Figure 6. Monthly statewide average precipitation anomalies in inches for Wisconsin between January 2023 and May 2026 compared to the 1991 to 2020 normal. Precipitation anomalies are from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information.

Spring ranked as the tenth wettest spring on record, with precipitation totals of 10.75 inches, 1.80 inches above normal. The seasonal surplus was driven overwhelmingly by April's record-setting rainfall. Additionally, seasonal snowfall averaged 19.3 inches across the state – 6.8 inches above normal – much of which fell in early spring.

The season showcased nearly every form of Wisconsin weather, from the historic mid-March blizzard to April's frequent severe weather outbreaks and flooding concerns, followed by the rapid return of dry conditions during May (Figure 7).

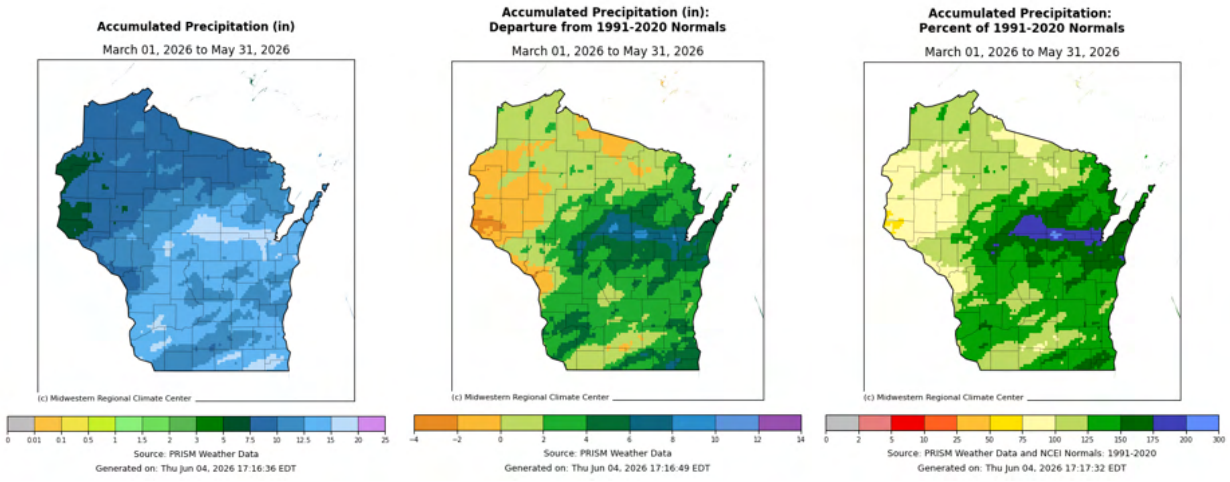


Figure 7 (left). Spring accumulated total precipitation in inches. Much of northern Wisconsin received less than 10 inches, while parts of central and southern Wisconsin received upwards of 20 inches.

Figure 7 (middle). Spring precipitation departure from normal, showing most of the state received above-normal precipitation for the season. Areas of west-central to northwestern Wisconsin, as well as patches of north-central and south-central Wisconsin, received below-normal precipitation.

Figure 7 (right). Spring precipitation percent of normal, highlighting the especially wet stretch from Marathon to Brown County, where they received over 175 percent of their normal spring precipitation. Much of the rest of central and southern Wisconsin saw over 125 percent of normal precipitation.

Quiet on the Storm Front

May brought a much-needed break for much of Wisconsin following a remarkably active April filled with repeated rounds of severe weather.

Only one tornado was confirmed across the state in May, though Wisconsin typically records about three tornadoes during May. This lone tornado was an EF0 (the weakest strength category) that touched down during the early morning hours of May 16 in southwestern Lafayette County, destroying a shed and uprooting and damaging several trees (Table 3).

Location	Date	Enhanced Fujita (EF) Rating	Estimated Maximum Winds	Damage Reported
Shullsburg (Lafayette Co.)	May 16	EF0	85 MPH	Damage to trees and a shed

Table 3. A summary of the tornado that occurred in Wisconsin during May. Information is from the National Weather Service. A map of this year's tornado events can be found here.

Additional rounds of thunderstorms crossed the state on May 17 and again on May 18 and 19, bringing gusty winds and isolated hail. Later in the month, scattered storms on May 27 knocked down numerous trees and power lines across central Wisconsin and produced hail up to two inches in diameter near Rib Mountain (Marathon County).

Despite these isolated events, May was a relatively quiet month by Wisconsin standards, and especially when compared to April's 27 tornadoes. The transition from the state's most tornadic April on record (since 1950) to a comparatively calm May was yet another example of the weather whiplash Wisconsin has been experiencing (Figure 8).

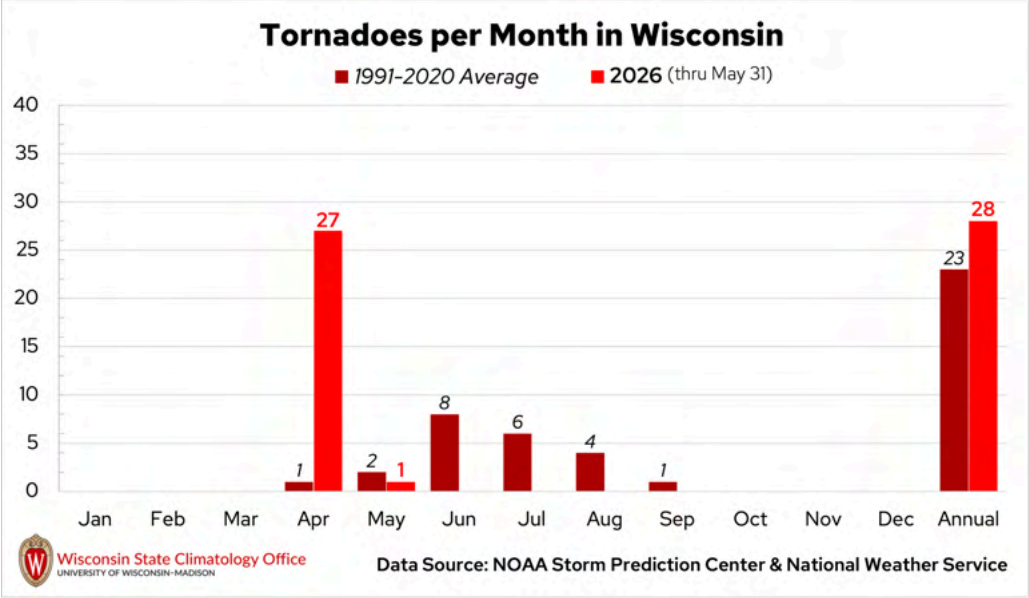


Figure 8. The number of tornadoes reported in Wisconsin per month through May 31, 2026, compared to the 1991 to 2020 statewide average. Data comes from NOAA's Storm Prediction Center and the National Weather Service.

Rapid Return of Dry Conditions

Following a spring that flipped from early-season dryness in March to widespread relief in April, Wisconsin entered May largely free of drought concerns. However, the month's warm, dry, and occasionally windy weather quickly allowed dry conditions to return.

During the first three weeks of May, less than two percent of the state was classified as abnormally dry (D0), a sharp contrast to the start of spring. By the last week of May, that coverage had expanded to nearly 40 percent, including larger portions of northwestern Wisconsin as well as west-central and southeastern Wisconsin (Figure 9).

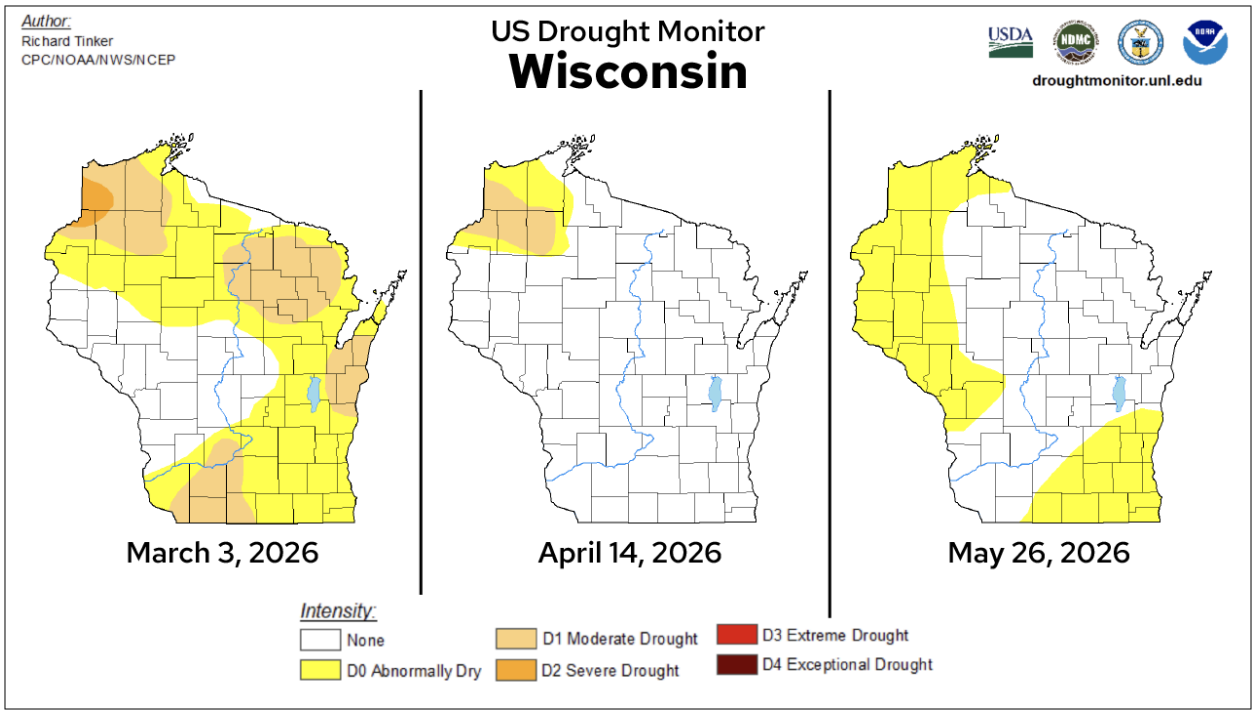


Figure 9. U.S. Drought Monitor conditions in Wisconsin as of March 3, April 14, and May 26, 2026, showing a reduction in drought mid-season before dry conditions expanded during May.

The state's Drought Severity and Coverage Index also climbed from near zero in mid-April to nearly 0.40 by the end of May, returning to levels last seen around mid-March. Together, these shifts highlight how quickly conditions can swing from widespread drought to excess water and back within a single season (Figure 10).

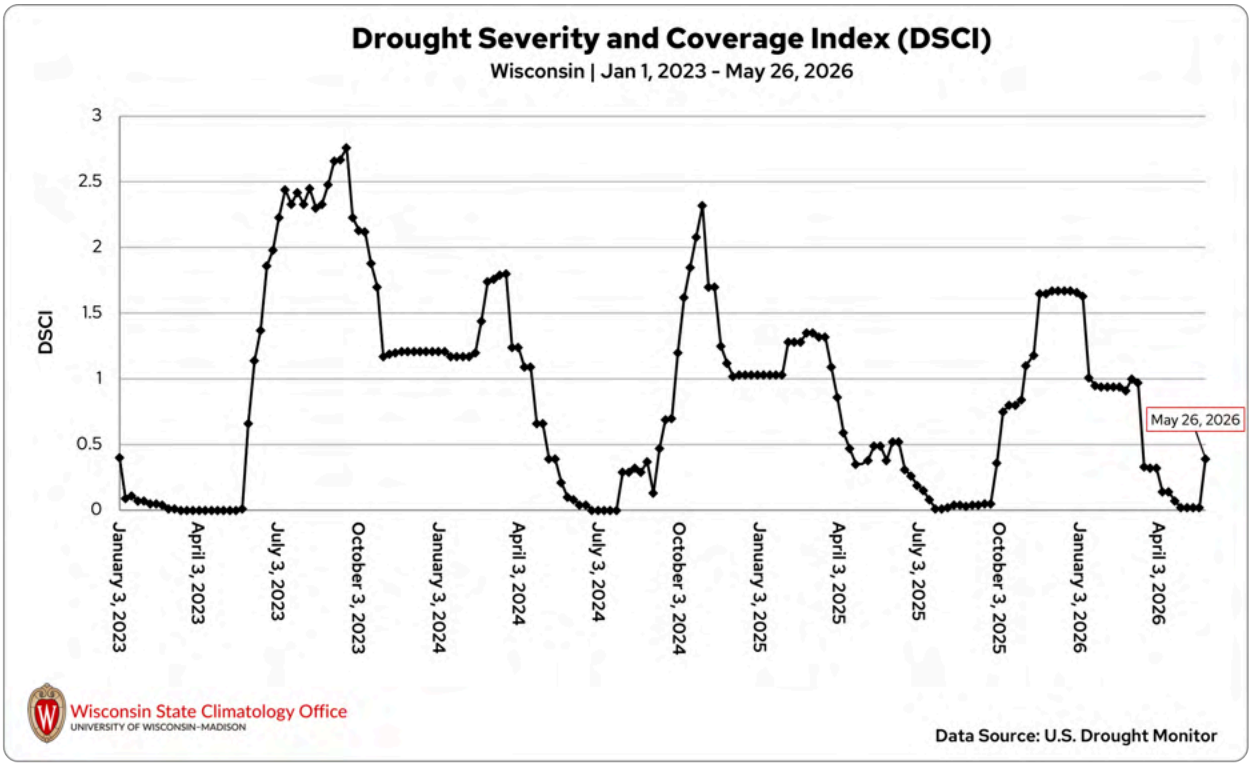


Figure 10. The Drought Severity and Coverage Index (DSCI) for Wisconsin from January 1, 2023, through May 26, 2026. Statistics come from the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Frost Threats and Drying Fields

Wisconsin agriculture faced a changing set of conditions throughout the month of May.

With the repeated frosts and freezes at the beginning of May and again mid-month, newly emerged crops, fruit trees, gardens, and other sensitive vegetation were at risk. These cold temperatures prompted growers to closely monitor conditions and, in some cases, take measures to protect vulnerable crops.

Reports from around the state indicated that some fruit blossoms and garden plants were nipped by the frost, and the cool weather likely slowed crop development and spring green-up, particularly in northern Wisconsin (Image 1).

Image 1. Apple flower cluster with browned, dried blossoms and shriveled tissues, consistent with freeze damage after bloom. Credit to Erin Warner and Josie Dillion in the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension's Notes from the Field.

As the month progressed, attention shifted from cold temperatures to increasing warmth and a growing lack of moisture. April's abundant rainfall had provided ample moisture for crops, pastures, and rangelands, but May's warm and dry conditions steadily reduced any moisture left in the soil.

By month's end, plant available water near seedling depth had become increasingly limited in most areas, and reports of dry gardens, stressed lawns, and emerging soil moisture concerns became more common.

In some locations, soil crusting affected crop emergence, including reports of soybean emergence issues in northeastern Wisconsin.

That said, many newly emerged crops appeared to be in generally good condition at the end of May. However, the combination of warmth, wind, and limited rainfall raised concerns about what could happen if the dryness persisted into June.

Climate Ed-ucation

After a spring marked by severe weather, it's worth highlighting one of Wisconsin's more overlooked storm hazards: lightning. Our latest blog, Watching for Lightning in Wisconsin, explores the science of lightning, Wisconsin's lightning climatology, and steps to stay safe when lightning strikes.

Climate Stats by Division

	Temperature (degrees Fahrenheit) May 2026		Liquid-Equivalent Precipitation (inches) May 2026		Liquid-Equivalent Precipitation (inches) Nov 1, 2025 – May 31, 2026	
Division	**Avg**	**Dept**	**Avg**	**Dept**	**Avg**	**Dept**
Northwest	53.4	-0.6	1.40	-2.40	12.50	-0.78
North Central	52.5	-0.9	1.81	-1.93	16.14	1.99
Northeast	52.2	-1.4	1.62	-1.86	17.66	3.73
West Central	56.9	0.0	1.39	-2.94	13.58	-1.20
Central	56.5	-0.1	1.99	-2.06	18.34	3.33
East Central	54.6	-0.4	1.84	-1.81	18.29	3.20
Southwest	57.7	-0.3	2.03	-2.42	17.16	0.49
South Central	58.2	0.3	1.29	-2.87	16.36	-0.37
Southeast	56.5	-0.2	0.71	-3.25	18.71	1.69
State	54.9	-0.5	1.61	-2.32	15.99	1.17

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

Record Driest	Bottom 1/10	Bottom 1/3	Normal	Top 1/3	Top 1/10	Record Wettest

Table 4. May climate statistics by Wisconsin's climate division, including average temperature in degrees Fahrenheit, and liquid-equivalent precipitation (rain plus melted snow) 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 temperature and precipitation statistics come from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information Climate at a Glance Tool.

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).