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The Blizzard of 1967 - Midwestern U.S.

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Introduction to the 10 Biggest Snowstorms of All Time



[Storm Image Gallery](#)

Sometimes, massive snowfall totals don't tell the whole story: Often, the worst snowstorms are marked by modest snowfalls grouped with heavy winds and low temperatures. See more [storm pictures](#).

David Sacks/[Getty Images](#)

Anyone who's ever lived in a chilly climate knows snowstorms well. Sometimes the [weather](#) forecast gives ample warning, but other times these storms catch us by surprise. Plows struggle to keep roads clear, schools are closed, events are canceled, flights are delayed and everyone gets sore backs from all the shoveling and snowblowing.

But there are those rare snowstorms that exceed all forecasts, break all records and cause mass devastation (even if it's devastation that will melt in a few days or weeks). These storms are the worst of the worst, weather events that seem more like elemental blasts of pure winter rather than a simple combination of wind, temperature and precipitation.

Defining the 10 "biggest" snowstorms can be a tricky task. You can't simply rely on objective measures like the amount of snow. Often, the worst storms involve relatively modest snowfalls whipped into zero-visibility by [hurricane](#)-force winds. Some storms are worse than others because they impact major urban areas, or are so widespread that they affect several major urban areas. Timing can play a role as well -- a storm during weekday rush hour is worse than one on a Saturday morning, and a freak early storm when leaves are still on the trees can cause enormous

amounts of damage. In fact, meteorologists have developed a system similar to the one used to classify hurricanes to measure the severity of winter storms. The Northeast Snowfall Impact Scale (NESIS) takes in account a variety of factors and generates a single number that signifies a storm's severity, usually on a scale from one to 10 -- and sometimes higher [source: [Science Daily](#)].

With those factors in mind, here is our list of the biggest snowstorms of all time.

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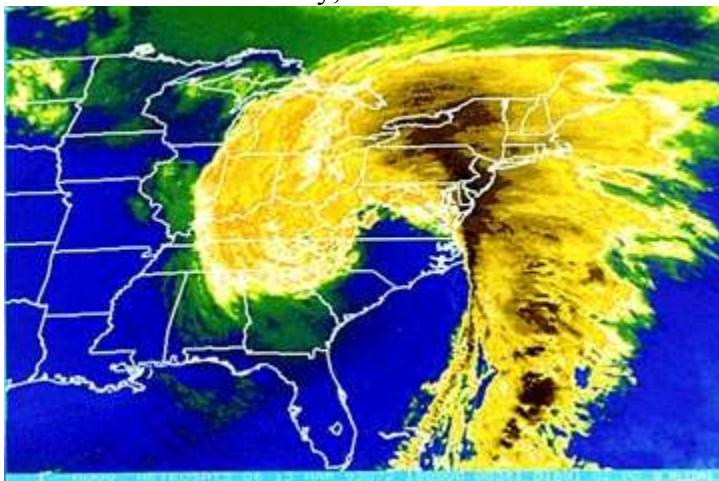
The Blizzard of 1888 -- Northeastern United States

This snowstorm was so massive it became a historical event. In terms of storm severity factors, this one had it all: enormous amounts of snow, frigid temperatures, howling winds whipping up monstrous snow drifts -- and a widespread area of effect that covered the entire northeastern [United States](#) from New England to the Chesapeake Bay, including major metropolitan areas like New York City [source: [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#)]. More than 400 people died during the storm, including more than 100 who were lost at sea.

The storm struck in early March and started out as a serious rain storm. From Sunday night to Monday morning, the temperature plummeted and the rain turned to snow. In the end, New York City received 22 inches (56 centimeters) of snow, shutting the city down and causing [floods](#) when the snow melted. Other places received much more: 58 inches (1.5 meters) of snow in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and 45 inches (1.14 m) in New Haven, Conn. Snow drifts as high as 50 or 60 feet (15.2 to 18.3 m) were reported on Long Island, and wind gusts were reported as fast as 80 mph (128.7 kph).

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The Storm of the Century, 1993 -- Eastern United States



The "Storm of the Century" certainly lived up to its name, affecting about half of the population of the U.S. in 1993.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ([NOAA](#))

In 1993, an early March storm surged up the east coast of the [United States](#), unleashing snow and wind on a wider area than any other storm in recorded history. Massive snowfalls were recorded from eastern Canada to Alabama. Parts of 26 states were hit; roughly half of the entire U.S. population was affected, including many large cities [source: [NOAA](#)]. Two hundred and seventy Americans were killed. This storm is often compared to the Blizzard of 1888 -- in many areas, it wasn't as severe and didn't drop as much snow, but it covered a much larger area.

This storm broke numerous weather records. A low temperature of minus 12 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 24.4 degrees Celsius) was recorded at Burlington, Vt., while even Daytona Beach, Fla., felt the effects, with a low of 31 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 0.56 degrees Celsius). Birmingham, Ala., received more than a foot of snow (30.5 cm), with four inches (10.2 cm) falling as far south as Atlanta, Ga. Snowfall totals were amplified farther north -- Syracuse, N.Y. got more than 40 inches (1.02 m), for example. Mountainous areas in the Appalachians and Catskills got the most snow, with recorded totals of 50 inches (1.27 m) or more. Wind speeds topped 70 mph (112.7 kph) in many places, and topped 100 mph (161 kph) in a few locations. Using storm surge and barometric pressure data, meteorologists say the Storm of the Century was the equivalent of a category three [hurricane](#); it ranked a 13.2 on the NESIS scale.

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New York City Blizzard of 2006

This storm was relatively mild; it covered a smaller area than other major snow storms and didn't have high winds. In fact, it wasn't technically a blizzard at all, since the scientific definition of a blizzard requires sustained wind speeds above 35 mph (56.3 kph) and visibility under 500 feet (152.4 meters). But this storm is notable for the one place it did hit: [New York City](#).

The [weather](#) station at New York's Central Park Zoo recorded a total of 26.9 inches (68.3 cm) of snow from the storm. That total equals the greatest snowfall in New York City recorded history and breaks a record that had been set in 1947 [source: [NOAA](#)].

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Lhunze County, Tibet -- 2008



A group of boys play in the snow in Tibet, site of one of history's biggest snowstorms.

China Photos/[Getty Images](#)

Tibet is known for some of the world's tallest mountains, including [Mount Everest](#). It gets bitterly cold there in the winter, but the climate is generally very arid. Some passes through the Himalayas remain passable throughout the year because of the low snowfall rates. For that reason, the snow storm that hit Lhunze County in October 2008 was a shock to its citizens.

Chinese officials reported an average snow depth of 59 inches (1.5 m). Some villages experienced continuous snow for 36 hours, dropping five or six feet (1.52 or 1.83 m) of snow on the ground [source: [China Daily](#)]. The amount of snow was so great that many buildings collapsed, resulting in seven deaths. Roads were closed for days as rescue crews fought to clear them and bring [food](#) to people trapped by the storm.

The economic effects of the storm were particularly harsh, as many locals were forced to slaughter or sell off large parts of their yak herds, or lost them entirely in the storm's aftermath.

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Mount Shasta, Calif. -- 1959

In 1959, a storm dumped a huge amount of snow on Mount Shasta, [Calif](#). The 189 inches (4.8 m) of snow recorded at the Mount Shasta Ski Bowl is the largest snowfall from a single storm in North America [source: [NOAA](#)]. However, many believe that 1993's "Storm of the Century" has eclipsed this mark in terms of the actual volume of snow, due to heavy snowfall across such a massive area.

Oddly enough, the storm didn't have much of an effect on locals. For one thing, residents of the Mount Shasta area were used to big snowstorms, so aside from some delays while they waited for plows to clear the wet, heavy snow, it didn't affect them much. Also, the bulk of the snow fell away from the communities of Weed and Mount Shasta City, covering [unpopulated](#) mountainous areas. Few people at the time even noted that the town had broken the single storm snowfall record [source: [College of the Siskiyous](#)].

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The Eastern Canadian Blizzard of 1971 -- Quebec and Ontario, Canada



Although a blizzard blanketed Eastern Canada with snow in 1971, most Canadians weren't at all bothered by the storm.

Win Initiative/[Getty Photos](#)

This March nor'easter (a powerful storm that blows in from the Atlantic Ocean) created classic blizzard conditions throughout eastern [Canada](#), dumping a foot and a half (45.7 cm) of snow on Montreal and more than two feet (61 cm) elsewhere in the region. On top of the snowfall, the storm produced heavy winds that whipped the snow into the air and obliterated visibility. These conditions, combined with frigid temperatures, resulted in more than 20 fatalities.

Although many Canadians took the wintry blast in stride -- residents of Cornwall, Ontario were encouraged to come to work despite the storm -- this blizzard caused a event virtually unheard of in Canadian history: the cancellation of a Montreal Canadiens [hockey](#) game [source: [Envirozine](#)]. It was the first time that a game at the Montreal Forum had been postponed since the flu epidemic of 1918 [source: [LCN](#)].

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The New England Blizzard of 1978

This dreadful storm stalled over New England for more than a day, dropping up to 4 inches (10.2 cm) of snow per hour. Boston, [Mass.](#) and several communities in Rhode Island were hit hardest, but even New York City -- located some four hours south of Boston -- felt the storm's effects. Meteorologists estimate snow totals between 1 and 3 feet (30.5 and 91.4 cm), with Boston's total accumulation of 27.1 inches (68.8 cm) setting the city's single-storm record [source: [NOAA](#)]. Wind speeds measured well over 100 mph (161 kph), causing severe visibility and drifting problems.

This storm was worse than most for two additional reasons. First, it struck during a period of high [tides](#), which led to some of the most severe coastal flooding that region had ever seen. Second, it struck in the afternoon. Since the morning had been clear, most people had gone to school and work as usual. The timing of the storm left thousands of people stranded in their cars

on roads and highways throughout the area [source: Hurricanes-blizzards-noreasters.com]. This contributed to the storm's high death rate; more than 100 people died in Massachusetts and Rhode Island [source: NOAA].

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The Great Snow of 1717 -- New England



The Great Snow of 1717 trapped people in their homes for days while they waited for warmer weather to melt the snow.

Noel Hendrickson/Getty Images

The Great Snow was really a series of four storms that struck in quick succession in late February and early March of 1717. No one is quite sure how widespread the effects were, as record-keeping was spotty in colonial New England. Heavy snow was recorded as far away as Philadelphia, but Boston got hit the hardest.

That winter had already been a snowy one, with reports of five feet (1.5 m) of snow already on the ground when the Great Snow began. Three or four more feet (91.4 or 122 cm) were added to that total, with drifts reportedly reaching 25 feet (7.6 m), burying entire houses or forcing people to exit from second story windows [source: NSIDC].

Such a massive snowfall would've hit hard in any era. But at a time when one could travel only by horseback or on foot, when no method of snow removal beyond a shovel and a strong back was available, and when many small communities struggled in ordinary winter conditions, the Great Snow hit especially hard. Roads were blocked for a week or more, and travel between New York City and Boston was impossible. In fact, there wasn't really anything that could be done about the roads -- except to wait for warmer weather to melt the snow.

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The Buffalo Blizzard of 1977

A modest snowfall and brutal winds averaging 45 mph (72.4 kph), with gusts of 75 mph (120.7 kph) would've made for a nasty storm at any time, but an unusually cold and snowy winter had left several feet of packed snow already on the ground. As if that weren't bad enough, snow covered much of the frozen surface of nearby Lake Erie, giving the wind even more snow to drift and blow. The result was zero visibility and roads blocked by snow. The storm brought intense cold (the temperature dropped more than 20 degrees in just a few hours) and stranded people at work or, worse, in their [cars](#) [source: [NOAA](#)]. The conditions led to 29 deaths in Western New York and Southern Ontario. Storm effects were felt into [Canada](#) and as far east as Watertown, N.Y.

Although the city of Buffalo generally gets less snow than other nearby cities and has warmer winter temperatures than many northern regions, this one storm cemented Buffalo's reputation as the blizzard capital of the United States. In fact, 1977 still holds Buffalo's record for the most snow in one season -- 199.4 inches (5.06 m) [source: [NOAA](#)].

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The Blizzard of 1967 - Midwestern U.S.



The Midwestern U.S. has seen its share of snowstorms; the Blizzard of 1967 dumped two feet of snow on the region and killed more than 70 people.

Scott Olson/Hulton Archive/[Getty Images](#)

The Midwest has suffered through many brutal blizzards and monstrous snow storms. However, many parts of this region are more sparsely [populated](#) than the eastern U.S., so the effects of these storms haven't been as acute. This storm, however, hit not just Chicago but cities as disparate as Kalamazoo, Mich., and Gary, Ind. [source: [NOAA](#)].

Snow totals topped 2 feet (61 cm), and winds exceeded 50 mph (80.5 kph). Sadly, the storm left 76 dead -- 26 in Chicago alone [source: [Chicago Tribune](#)]. It set the record for a 24-hour snowfall in Chicago (23 inches or 58.4 cm). Strangely, the area saw record high temperatures in the 60s and a severe [tornado](#) outbreak in the days before the storm hit.

