

Logan Canyon sets icy record

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Looking for a taste of the Arctic without leaving Cache Valley? Just drive up Logan Canyon and stop by the Peter Sinks, where the temperature dropped to minus 46 degrees in February - this year's record low for the contiguous United States.

That may sound nippy, but it's nothing compared to the winter of 1985.

Back then the popular snowmobiling area hit a bone chilling minus 69.3 degrees, the second coldest temperature ever measured in the lower 48 states, edged out only by a measurement of minus 69.7 degrees at Roger's Pass, Mont., in 1954.

But now, with new research underway in Logan Canyon, the Sinks may soon reign supreme.

Scientists believe that it's only a matter of time before they record temperatures of minus 70 degrees or lower in the area in eastern Cache County.

"This was a mild winter for Peter Sinks," said Jobie Carlisle, a research technician at the Utah Climate Center, which is located at Utah State University. "If we were to monitor at Peter Sinks for five years, we would probably break that record. Once in five years we are going to get a situation where ... we'll get these record temperatures."

The UCC has begun the process of gathering these statistics, thanks to a monitoring station installed in October 2009. Automated equipment at the bottom of the basin logs temperatures at three elevations along with the wind's speed and direction; a repeater station on the Sinks' north rim transmits the data to Carlisle's computer at Utah State.

While this is not the first time weather information has been collected at Peter Sinks, Carlisle and his colleagues at UCC hope that their effort will be more permanent than previous attempts.

Rob Gillies, state climatologist and UCC director, explained that 30 years of measurements are needed to truly establish a record temperature.

"Minus 60 may occur quite a lot, but it's never been measured, so we don't know if that is a statistical outlier - we just know that it's the coldest we've ever recorded up there," Gillies said. "It's an unusual site. It'll be interesting to see what comes about. You never know, you might have minus 80 there for all we know."

Another question the researchers will address is whether frigid conditions are also present in the summer. Currently the U.S. Forest Service only allows the UCC monitoring station to be up during the winter because of concerns that it will disturb migrating birds. Gillies and Carlisle will soon submit a request that the agency drop the limitation.

It is hard to know what sort of measurements would be found during the hot months, Gillies said, but "there will be the same effects minus the snow."

"You would expect to see some pretty low temperatures," he added. "We'd expect to see some interesting data, some interesting numbers."

This sense of records waiting to be broken has captured the imaginations of extreme "weather weenies" across the country who sent Gillies a slew of e-mails asking for temperature monitoring in the Peter Sinks and motivated him to get started.

In the spring, the UCC teamed up with Campbell Scientific, who helped the team find inexpensive or free equipment.

The internationally recognized measurement technology manufacturer had previously assisted with recording temperatures in the Sinks area in 1984 and also was involved with an effort in 2003.

That year, USU students Tim Wright and Joshua Campbell installed a portable monitoring station that was on loan from the company, taking it down the following spring.

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