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Warmer winters shrink lakes' ice cover

March 13, 2002

BY GARY WISBY ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

In what looks like a trend, ice cover on Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes is down for the fifth winter in a row.

That's the longest stretch Raymond Assel has seen in the 30 years he's been monitoring lake ice for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

According to long-term averages, Lake Michigan should be 25 percent ice-covered now. But in February, the last month for which data have been analyzed, the cover was less than 10 percent.

"When it goes five years in a row, it's entirely notable that this is a trend," said Assel, a climatologist for NOAA's Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory.

"If we get another two or three or four [winters] like this, then you start to suspect a new ice cover regime in the lakes."

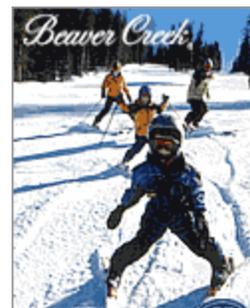
Lack of lake ice increases evaporation. Over the long term, that can remove enough water to significantly impact lake levels.

Not this year, though. Partly because of a wet February, Lake Michigan levels promise to be six inches higher than last summer, said Roger Gauthier, who keeps track of lake levels for the Army Corps of Engineers.

Evaporation never took off because there wasn't enough difference between water temperatures and the higher-than-usual air temperatures, Gauthier said.

"It's been a very peculiar winter, to say the least," he said. "This year there was close to no ice cover."

One result was lake-effect snow that dumped 7 1/2 feet on Michigan's Lower Peninsula and 8 1/2 feet on Buffalo, N.Y., in early winter.



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The absence of ice also is hard on whitefish, Assel said. They spawn in shallow water, and without ice cover, winter winds whip up currents that can destroy their eggs.

There is no ice on the Illinois shoreline of Lake Michigan. Green Bay in Wisconsin is frozen over, as are the Straits of Mackinac, and there is a ribbon of ice on the Michigan shore between Ludington and Muskegon.

Assel collects such information via satellite from the National Ice Center in Suitland, Md., a Washington, D.C. suburb. That saves him time and trouble-- he used to check out the ice on six- to eight-hour flights across the Great Lakes in a U.S. Coast Guard plane.

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