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Janesville's snowfall total elicits a collective 'Meh'

By [Neil Johnson](#)

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JANESVILLE—Janesville snow removal and landscaping operator Nate Hrobsky has found scant use for his snowplow trucks most of this winter.

Now, Hrobsky says his company, Nate's Landscaping and Snow Removal, is looking to roll out a sea of new mulch for at least one of his commercial contracts.

The work of spreading wood chips normally would occur weeks later, but thanks to a February and March that have felt more like April, it's what's going on for Hrobsky.

“We will take it,” Hrobsky said. “Normally, we don't start on anything landscaping until the first of April, but here we are. It's been such a slow winter for snow, my guys are just champing at the bit.”

It's been that kind of topsy-turvy Wisconsin winter, and we're nearing the end of the snowy season that basically wasn't. Except for a December that brought copious amounts of snow—22 inches of it—the winter brought slim pickings for guys such as Hrobsky.

So far, January, February and early March have produced just 2.6 inches of snow.

Janesville's snow total this winter fell about 9 inches shy of the annual average.

That's the equivalent of four fewer “snow emergencies” than normal. Excluding a few ice storms that kept Hrobsky's fleet of nine plow trucks busy laying salt in commercial parking lots, the winter for him fell somewhere between “mild” and “meh.”

While Hrobsky has seen the lines blur between the toils of winter and spring, creatures much smaller than snowplows might have taken the balmy winter as a cue to get an earlier start.

UW-Extension entomologist P.J. Liesch, said a nasty, cold winter can have a chilling effect on some of the 25,000 species of bugs in southern Wisconsin—especially those that don't winter here.

The toughest winters for snowbird-type bugs, Liesch said, would be those that bring prolonged, deep-freeze weather and snow that arrives early and lingers late.

Rock County had little of that kind of weather this winter—in fact, the warm snap in February brought several days of false spring along with 60-degree temperatures. That weather pushed jet streams and balmy, warm fronts from southern climes into the upper Midwest earlier than usual.

When that happens, Liesch said, there's a better chance that some bugs that normally show up in late spring would travel north early.

The suspects could include the black cutworm, the potato leaf hopper, corn earworms, army worms and other species that aren't exactly on local farmers' guest list to pancake breakfasts.

“Those insects spend the winter down South. They get carried up here every year by storm fronts and then the jet stream,” Liesch said. “One potential thought is that if you have spring that warms up earlier or stays warmer, it would give some of these insects an opportunity to get up here earlier and have a longer season.”

That might not always mean bigger bug problems across the board, Liesch said. Some insects' breeding and survival comes down to how wet a spring is. Damp and warm weather can make some varieties easy marks for fungal infections, which can kill off populations that make an early entry here.

As for the perennial scourge of the local tree canopy—the emerald ash borer—there's not much evidence it's aided or hindered by winter weather.

Liesch said researchers have found the tree-killing beetle has shown an ability to withstand harsh Russian winters and balmy Asian seasons with equal aplomb.

Regardless of what bugs and insects do in the coming days, signs are cropping up that some people are ready to stick a fork in this nonsnowy winter.

John Traynor, a Rock County Highway Department supervisor, said his crews plan to begin rolling up snow fencing on some stretches of rural highways.

Traynor said the county doesn't typically begin removing snow fences in early March. Snow usually still covers the ground or the fences are sometimes locked up in icy topsoil when the Ides of March roll around.

But he said chances are good that any snow that might fall in coming days could be like the pittance of flakes that fell Thursday—and then almost immediately melted.

Hrobsky said the ground's still too soft for his company to do major landscaping and cleanup work, and he'd never consider planting flowers this early.

“We had a spring, it was 2012, when we were actually cutting grass in early March. None of that yet, but the guys are getting excited. The phone's been ringing like crazy about other landscaping things lately,” he said.

“You do have to keep in mind that it's March, and it's Wisconsin. We've still got to wait to see whether it's going to be 60 degrees or 6 inches of snow.”