

THE CONVERSATION (EN)

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Storms across US bring heavy snow, dangerous ice, tornado in California

Omaha, Nebraska —

A tornado near a mall in central California swept up cars, uprooted trees and sent several people to the hospital. In San Francisco, authorities issued the first-ever tornado warning.

Elsewhere, inclement weather plagued areas of the U.S., with dangerous conditions including heavy snow in upstate New York, a major ice storm in Midwest states and severe weather warnings around Lake Tahoe.

The ice storm beginning Friday evening created treacherous driving conditions across Iowa and eastern Nebraska Friday and into Saturday and prompted temporary closures of Interstate 80 after numerous cars and trucks slid off the road. In upstate New York, more than 33 inches (84 centimeters) was reported near Orchard Park, which is often a landing point for lake-effect snow.

On Saturday, a tornado touched down near a shopping mall in Scotts Valley, California, about 110 kilometers south of San Francisco, around 1:40 p.m. The tornado overturned cars and toppled trees and utility poles, the National Weather Service said. The Scotts Valley Police Department said several people were injured and taken to hospitals.

In San Francisco, some trees toppled onto cars and streets and damaged roofs. The damage was due to 129-kph straight-line winds, not a tornado, weather service meteorologist Dalton Behringer said Sunday.

Roger Gass, a meteorologist in the weather service's office in Monterey, California, said the warning of a possible tornado in San Francisco was a first for the city, noting an advanced alert did not go out before the last tornado struck nearly 20 years ago.

"I would guess there wasn't a clear signature on radar for a warning in 2005," said Gass, who was not there at the time.

The fast-moving storm prompted warnings for residents to take shelter, but few people have basements in the area.

More than 30 centimeters of snow fell at some Lake Tahoe ski resorts, and 181-kph gust of wind was recorded at the Mammoth Mountain resort south of Yosemite National Park, according to the weather service's office in Reno, Nevada. Up to 90 centimeters of snow was forecast for the Sierra Nevada mountaintops.

The weekend Tahoe Live music festival at Palisades Tahoe ski resort in California went ahead as planned in spite of a snowstorm Saturday. Lil Wayne and Diplo were scheduled to perform Sunday, the festival's website said. An avalanche warning was in effect at least until Monday morning in the area.

Interstate 80 was closed along a 130-kilometer stretch from

Applegate, California, to the Nevada line just west of Reno on Saturday. The California Highway Patrol reopened the road in the afternoon for passenger vehicles with chains or four-wheel drive and snow tires.

The severe weather in the Midwest resulted in at least one death. The Washington County Sheriff's office in Nebraska said a 57-year-old woman died after she lost control of her pickup on Highway 30 near Arlington and hit an oncoming truck. The other driver sustained minor injuries.

Businesses announced plans to open late Saturday as temperatures rose high enough in the afternoon to melt the ice in most places.

"Luckily some warmer air is moving in behind this to make it temporary," said Dave Cousins, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's office in Davenport, Iowa.

Tens of thousands of people in western Washington state lost electricity Saturday as the system delivered rain and gusty winds, local news outlets reported.

'North Pole' flight takes kids to Santa in transformed Denver airport hangar

Denver, Colorado —

Dozens of kids cheered on a festively decked-out plane in Denver on Saturday when the pilot announced their destination for the day: the North Pole.

More than 100 children, some of whom have serious health issues, were then taken on a roughly 45-minute flight near the city before landing back at Denver International Airport and being towed to a hangar transformed by United Airlines employees and volunteers into the North Pole.

Streamers, paper snowflakes and tufts of cotton resembling feathery snow dotted the plane and seats. Flight personnel paraded a bubble machine up and down the aisle to shouts of "bubbles, bubbles, bubbles" from the excited children. Holiday songs played in the background and there were apple snacks and juice for all.

Before landing, the children were asked to close their window shades. When they opened, the kids were met by the sight of a waiting Santa and Mrs. Claus and a host of elves. An ice cream truck was on hand and the children received gifts.

Bryce Bosley, 6, was tickled to see Santa and all the North Pole had to offer.

"The North Pole is fun because there's games, food, and all the activities are really fun," he said.

United Capt. Bob Zimmermann, the holiday flight's pilot, was struck by the joy and wonder of the youngsters.

"Throughout the year I'll think of the fantasy flight," he said. "When life seems to get tough or I want to complain about something, I remember these kids and the joy and the love and what this feels like, and it just keeps my life in perspective."

United partnered with Make-A-Wish Colorado, Girls Inc., Children's Hospital Colorado and Rocky Mountain Down Syndrome Association to invite Denver-area kids ages 3 to 10 years on the flight.

For more than 30 years, United has staged its annual "fantasy flights" to fictional North Poles at airports around the world to bring holiday cheer to children and their families.

This year they took place in 13 cities, starting Dec. 5 in Honolulu and then in Washington, Houston, Los Angeles, London, Chicago, San Francisco, Tokyo, Cleveland and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and on the island of Guam. Newark, New Jersey, also had a flight Saturday.

Jonna McGrath, United's vice president for operations at its Denver hub, has participated in 29 flights and said it is one of her favorite days of the year.

"It gives them a day where they are away from some of the challenges they face in their day-to-day life," said McGrath, who was dressed as an elf. "Bringing a little magic and some gifts to their holiday season is something they'll never forget."

'Tis the season for roasting chestnuts. But in US, native ones are almost gone

It's been a very long time since vendors sold the American chestnut on city sidewalks. It's no longer the variety whose smell some people associate with Christmastime as it wafts from street carts. Because it's virtually extinct.

But memories of the American chestnut's legacy keep resurfacing for the researchers who want to bring it back. They describe its wood that paneled the homes and schoolrooms of their grandparents, or the photographs of men on the street corners of old Baltimore, with hot bags of nuts cooked on charcoal.

"You can feel that connection to a place, and that connection to utility, and the connection to the importance that this tree played in virtually every aspect of the lives of people," said Sara Fern Fitzsimmons, chief conservation officer with The American Chestnut Foundation, which is working to restore the tree to flourish as it once did.

Fitzsimmons said that will likely take a lot longer than many chestnut enthusiasts had hoped. Researchers have hit roadblocks with attempts to breed or genetically modify a version that can withstand the invasive blight that has hammered the species since the early 1900s. If and when they do find the right variety, they'll need to figure out how to plant it and help it thrive in forests that are under pressure from climate change, globalization and development.

Once a hallmark of forests from Georgia to New England, American chestnuts now exist mostly as a vast network of root systems underground, sending up shoots. They grow for a time,

but the fungal blight takes hold when the trees start maturing. East Asian varieties, like those that introduced the blight in the first place, are immune to the blight, and produce most of the edible chestnuts for fall and winter snacking.

Still, American chestnut trees are better-suited for timber, they're culturally loved by people all over North America and they used to be an important species for the ecological health of forests, providing a reliable source of nutritious food and shelter for wildlife and humans alike. "It was really a pretty significant species to lose," said Amy Brunner, an associate professor at Virginia Tech who works on the tree's genetics. "The more diversity you lose, the less resilient that forest ecosystem is."

The American Chestnut Foundation, among others, has been trying for decades to breed a hybrid that is mostly American in genetics but with the fungus-fighting traits of the Chinese type. Fitzsimmons said breeders have learned just how difficult that is — blight resistance involves several different genes, and it has proven hard to separate them from the traits that distinguish Chinese chestnuts.

To speed the process, some scientists have been working on genetically modifying American chestnuts to see if they can boost their immunity that way instead. But progress was delayed by a recent mix-up involving two versions of a genetically modified American chestnut that scientists at State University of New York had hoped could get through the regulatory process as soon as this year.

"It kind of stinks that it happened because now it's taking a little bit longer than we had hoped," said Linda McGuigan, a research support specialist at the university. But scientists there and elsewhere are continuing to pursue many avenues.

"I don't think you will get there, to all you desire, without both," Brunner said, referring to the two main methods of breeding and genetic modification. Breeding is vital for achieving enough genetic diversity for trees to adapt to a changing world, she said, but added that she thinks some genetic manipulation will be needed to get to enough blight resistance for American chestnuts to stand a chance.

Meanwhile, other scientists are working on projects to tackle another big challenge ahead for chestnuts: where to plant them. If a successful tree is cobbled together with genes taken from trees from Tennessee to New York, where would it have the best chance at surviving, given how a warming planet is changing habitat around the world?

A team at Virginia Tech published a paper this summer to try to answer that question. They looked at 32 climate variables and compared them to projected future climates, then calculated the shortest distance that regionally specific American chestnuts would have to move to offset warming. The idea was to one day help them survive a new climate while keeping them as close as possible to where they once thrived.

"I don't think it's hyperbolic to say it's revolutionary" for teams at The American Chestnut Foundation, said Fitzsimmons, who contributed data to the project. She said the project will help them better figure out where to collect genes from the immature trees that remain across the country.

Tom Kimmerer, a forest scientist who taught at the University of

Kentucky, is working on a book about trees including the American chestnut. Kimmerer, who was not involved in the research, called it “robust and well supported” and “critically important to the success of the chestnut.”

Stacy Clark, a research forester at the U.S. Forest Service, said the findings are useful, but added that they need to be backed up with real-world experiments. “I think with advancements in genetics, they can probably get pretty fast data off of those field trials. But still, all of that takes time and effort, right?”

For now, forest scientists know their work might not pay off in their lifetimes. It’s a lesson that became clear for the community when pioneering chestnut restoration experts Bill Powell and Chuck Maynard both died in the past 13 months. McGuigan supported both of their research for years as lab manager at SUNY’s college of environmental science and forestry.

“The project moves on, lives on. And we honor their memory,” McGuigan said. “I want to do something good for the future, for my children.”

‘Kraven the Hunter’ flops while ‘Moana 2’ tops the box office again

The Spider-Man spinoff “Kraven the Hunter” got off to a disastrous start in North American theaters this weekend.

The movie starring Aaron Taylor-Johnson earned only \$11 million, according to studio estimates Sunday, making it one of the worst openings for a Marvel-adjacent property. Its box office take was even less than the film “Madame Web.”

The weekend’s other major studio release was Warner Bros.’ animated “The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim,” which made \$4.6 million. Made for about \$30 million, the movie is set 183 years before the events of “The Lord of the Rings” films and was fast-tracked to ensure New Line did not lose the rights to Tolkien’s novels. Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens have been working on future live-action films for the franchise.

Meanwhile, the top of the charts again belonged to “Moana 2” and “Wicked.”

“Moana” added \$26.6 million to its domestic total in its third weekend and \$57.2 million internationally, bringing its global tally to \$717 million. It’s now the fourth highest grossing film of the year, surpassing “Dune: Part Two.”

“Wicked,” which is in its fourth weekend, brought in another \$22.5 million to take second place. The Universal musical has made over \$359 million domestically and over \$500 million worldwide.

“Gladiator II” also made \$7.8 million, bringing its domestic total to \$145.9 million in four weeks.

“Kraven the Hunter” is the latest misfire from Sony in its attempt to mine the Spider-Man universe for spin-off franchises without the lucrative web slinger himself. “Kraven” joins “Madame Web” and “Morbius” in franchise additions that fell flat with both audiences and critics. The one exception on this rollercoaster journey has been the “Venom” trilogy, which has made over \$1.8 billion worldwide.

The R-rated “Kraven the Hunter” was directed by J.C. Chandor and faced a number of delays, partly due to the Hollywood strikes. It was shot nearly three years ago and originally slated to hit theaters in January 2023. The film cost a reported \$110 million to produce and was co-financed by TSG. Internationally, it made \$15 million, but its potential for longevity appears limited: It currently carries a 15% “fresh” rating on Rotten Tomatoes and got a C grade on CinemaScore from opening weekend audiences.

“It’s not always a guarantee that you’ll be able to connect with audiences when you have a spinoff character,” said Paul Dergarabedian, the senior media analyst for Comscore. “General audiences seem to want to know exactly what they’re getting.”

Several awards contenders opened in limited release over the weekend, including Paramount’s “September 5” about ABC’s coverage of the Munich Olympics hostage crisis. Amazon MGM and Orion’s “Nickel Boys,” based on Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer-winner about an abusive reform school in Florida, opened in two theaters in New York. It averaged \$30,422 per screen and will be expanding to Los Angeles before going nationwide in the coming weeks.

Some big hitters are on the way in the home stretch of the 2024 box office. “Mufasa” and “Sonic the Hedgehog 3” will hit in the coming weeks along with a bevy of arthouse and adult releases like “Babygirl,” “Nosferatu” and “A Complete Unknown.”

The box office has seen a dramatic recovery since June, when it was down nearly 28% from the previous year. The deficit now stands at 4.8%.

Final domestic figures will be released Monday. Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore:

1. “Moana 2,” \$26.6 million.
 2. “Wicked,” \$22.5 million.
 3. “Kraven the Hunter,” \$11 million.
 4. “Gladiator II,” \$7.8 million.
 5. “Red One,” \$4.6 million.
 6. “Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim,” \$4.5 million.
 7. “Interstellar” (rerelease), \$3.3 million.
 8. “Pushpa: The Rule — Part 2,” \$1.6 million.
 9. “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” \$1.4 million.
 10. “Queer,” \$790,954.
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