Guessing game

No sure way to forecast the weather

By KAREN CLARK
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SANTA CRUZ — Be it woolly worms or weathermen, the only sure thing you can say about the weather is that there's no sure thing about the weather.

"The fact of the matter is the only weather you can be sure of is the weather in your face, and everything else is a guess," said Sandy Lydon, weather anchor for KCBA television Channel 35 in Salinas.

■ *No shortage of natural ways to predict weather — Page A14*

Can anyone predict what's in store this winter for drought-weary Californians thirsting for rain and a good ski season?

The folks at the National Weather Service in Redwood City say uh-uh — unless you take their prediction of a 60-percent chance of average rainfall this season as more accurate than a throw of the dice.

Across the country in Pikeville, Ky., the annual Lee County Woolly Worm Survey issued this week indicated the nation is in for a cold one.

"The Lee County woolly worms (caterpillars) are never in error," said Rosemary Porter Kilduff of Beattyville in rural eastern Kentucky, who said the coloring of the caterpillars along with the inner designs of persimmon seeds, the number of foggy mornings in August and the height of hornet's nests are factored into the forecast.

Santa Cruz's own weather guru, Ron MacDonald, isn't much for long-range predictions — based on woolly worms or anything else — but he's chock-full of the city's weathered past.

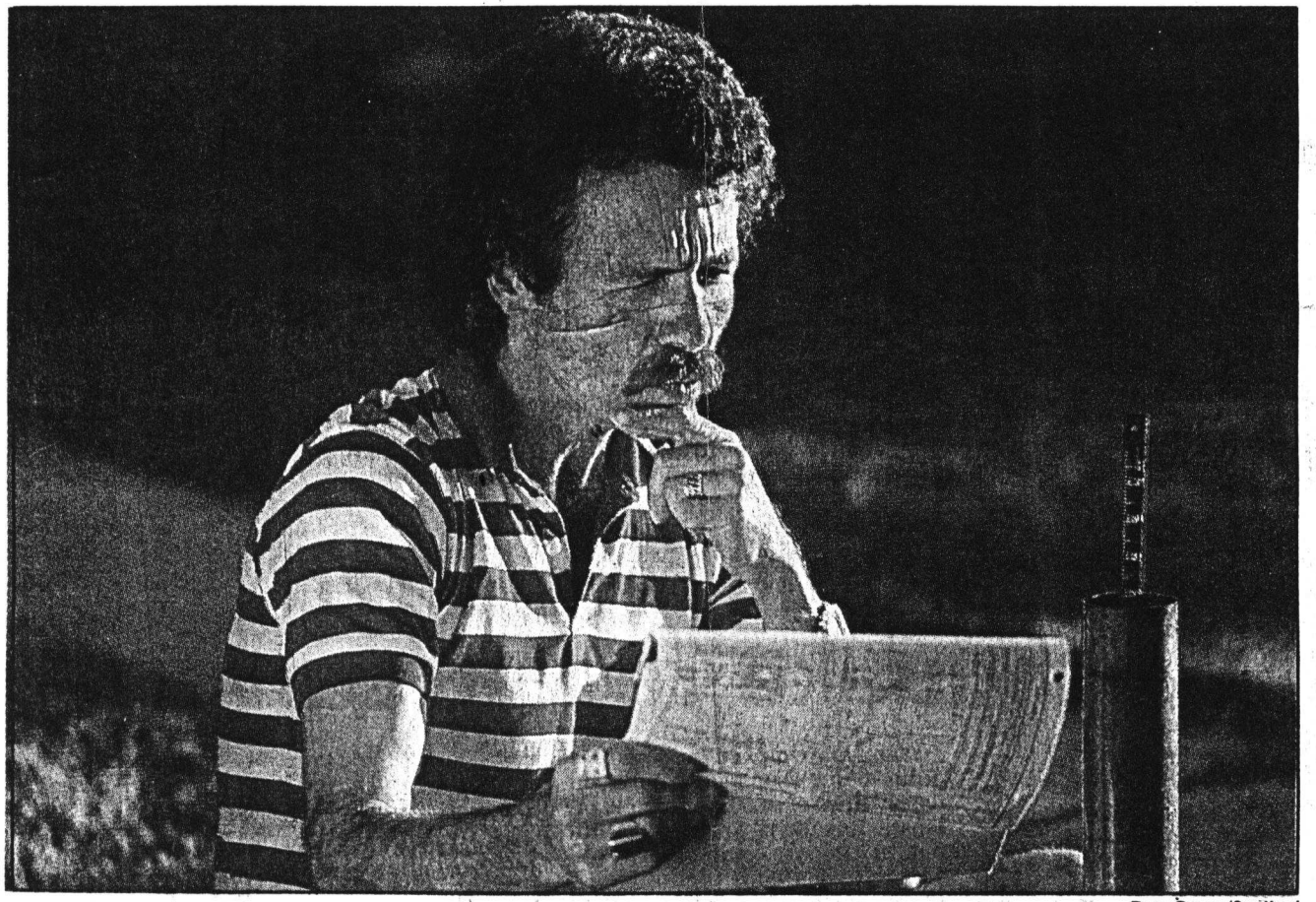
Let's talk stats:

- The average yearly rainfall in the city of Santa Cruz is about 29 inches. The last time there was that much rain was in the 1985-86 season, when 39.54 inches fell.
- The grim news since then is this: 17.59 inches fell in 1986-87; 18.73 inches fell in 1987-88; 23.26 inches fell in 1988-89; and only 17.46 inches fell in the 1989-90 season.
- The months when the most rain typically falls are January (6 inches), December (5 inches) and February (4½ inches). "If we don't get average rain in those three months we start hurting because we usually don't make it up in the other months," said MacDonald.
- The city's driest season on record was in 1923-24 when only 10.85 inches fell. On the other side of the rain gauge, 61.62 inches fell during the 1940-41 season.

The last really wet year was in 1982-83 when 52.95 inches was recorded. The year before, 47.06 inches fell, including a whopping 9 inches during a 24-hour period on Jan. 4.

- The last time there was a multi-year drought ("Those years used to be a big deal, but they've been eclipsed.") was in 1975-76 when 13.88 inches fell, and 1976-77 when 15.93 inches was recorded.

Please see WEATHER — A14



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Checking his rain log, Ronald MacDonald can tell you what weather's been, but not what it will be.

Weather

Continued from Page A1

There was a problem in 1927 through 1931 when no year exceeded 22 inches of rain, including the 1930-31 season when only 13.15 inches was recorded.

So what about this coming season?

"Looking at what I've just told you, what could a person say?" said MacDonald. "It's just not very predictable. . . . I tried to rely on my bones before, and it doesn't do any good."

The scientists won't make predictions, but they will talk scary.

"The drought we currently have here has . . . started to erode so far into our (water) savings that unless we get normal or fairly above normal rain this year we will not be able to get through next year without going into (water) bankruptcy, you might say," said Gary Barbato, a hydrologist with the weather service in Redwood City.

He explained that California "banks" its water in reservoirs during wet years in order to have a little something put away for a dry day. But after four years of dry days, that savings account has dwindled to the meager stage.

"The numbers for us now show it's drier than at anytime in the past 95 years," said Barbato. "It's taken only seven years to fall from the wettest point in 95 years to our driest."

Coastal cities like Santa Cruz have done a good job of conserving water supplies, he said, noting that Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo led the way with 45 percent reductions in use this past season.

Santa Cruz, which wanted to save 24 percent, came in with a 35 percent cut in water use between May and the end of September, said Ann-Marie Mitroff, city water conservation coordinator.

"In the midst of all the forecasts, the one thing we can feel proud about . . . is people have done such an exceptional job of saving water in our service area," she said. "Conservation practices have saved an extraordinary amount of water."

Because of people's efforts to cut back, said Mitroff, even if the drought continues another year Santa Cruz will be no worse off than this year. The savings have been "banked" in Loch Lomond Reservoir, which serves local water needs.

"We're not as low now at the reservoir as we were at this time last year," said Mitroff. "And we know we'll probably get as much rainfall this year."

Mary Webb, whose family runs Webb's Organic Farms in Soquel, also said she thinks we'll get average rain this year. She based her prediction on faith.

"I just think the good Lord will wet the soil a little more for us this year," said Webb, who came to the Santa Cruz area in 1933. "I think we're going to have about 26 to 30 inches."

Webb said her mother relied on the "Old Farmer's Almanac" and, "Mama was better at predicting the weather than the scientists."

If Mama is right, Santa Cruz is in for a warmer than normal late fall and winter, and the possibility that rainfall will be "well below normal with a continuation of drought conditions."

That's the forecast in the 1991 "Old Farmer's Almanac," which did predict an average snowfall in the northern mountains.

"Early December may see a winter storm hit Southern California and then the north should get one just before Christmas," predicted the almanac. "January is anticipated to be very warm and dry, while February and the first half of March will be cooler, but continue drier than normal."

"Old Farmer's Almanac" authors said the 199 years of predictions are based on "both a secret formula devised by the founder of the almanac in 1792, and by the most modern scientific calculations based on solar activity."

The almanac must know something meteorologists have missed.

"It's not a real impressive amount of skill that we have at looking at seasonal weather patterns," said Dan Cayan, a climate researcher with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego. "But it's probably better than using dice or looking at your bunions."

Cayan said studies at Scripps in the past 15 years showed some success at seasonal predictions, but "there is also reason to be humble. It's an endeavor where you're always going to be wrong, but sometimes you're less wrong than other times."

To make a seasonal forecast, he said, experts look at such things as past averages, the amount of moisture in the soil, ocean temperatures and the conditions over the most recent past seasons.

"There's always going to be a significant amount of uncertainty in this sort of thing," said Cayan. "Parts of the systems are just unpredictable. They depend on small influences that gang up and cascade, and we'll never be certain what's going to happen many days from now."

Apple skins, corn husks and other sure-fire signs

SANTA CRUZ — If a large number of tarantulas are seen crossing south Monterey County roads this time of year, you can bet it's going to be a wet winter.

When it comes to forecasting-folklore, there is no shortage of ideas, says KCBA Channel 35 weatherman Sandy Lydon. Among the tips Lydon has received from his viewers is the tarantula theory. Added to that is the unusually large acorn crop and the fact the buzzards left early for their annual migration south — both considered signals in local lore that we're in for a wet one.

"So what I call the spider-acorn-buzzard indicators tell us it's going to be a very wet winter," said Lydon, who said he is beginning to place more store in these indicators than in the scientific predictions issued by the weather service.

"They can't predict long-term weather like they'd like to, there's just not enough data to go on."

Other folklore gems include:

- A tough apple skin means a hard winter.
- Look for a heavy winter when the buds on plants have heavy coats.
- If corn husks are thicker than usual, a cold winter is ahead.
- When squirrels lay in a big store of nuts, look for a hard winter.
- The first three days of any season rule the weather for that season.
- A cold November signifies a mild winter.
- A large number of foggy days in October indicates a hard winter.
- Perhaps the most telling, however, is an old farmers' saying: All signs fail in times of drought.

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