

Snow dusts county

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SANTA CRUZ — Local rainfall is still just a bit more than half of normal, but we're already well above normal snowfall.

It's either quite late or way early, but Santa Cruz Mountain residents got their own version of winter with a surprise dusting of snow around 5:30 to 6:15 Monday evening.

And, the snow wasn't limited to mountain areas. There were reports of snow falling on Santa Cruz' west side along Mission and Swift streets and at UCSC, although it wasn't heavy enough to stick to roads.

Santa Cruz weatherman Ron MacDonald said it was the first snow within the city limits in 11 years. The last snowfall was Feb. 5, 1976, he said, when approximately two inches fell in some areas. The last reported snow in the mountains was March 6, 1985.

The strange mix of weather produced hail in Golden Gate Park, snow in Oakland and strong winds throughout the San Francisco Bay area Monday. Gales of up to 50 mph were predicted to bash California's northern coast Tuesday.

MacDonald attributed the unusual Santa Cruz weather to a rather rare local weather phenomenon — a so-called "thunder cell." Such a thunder cell is similar to funnel clouds, being a single huge cloud as opposed to the normal storm front. The last such cell to hit Santa Cruz was in September, 1984.

Snow began falling around 5:30 p.m. — just in time to catch commuters on the summit by surprise. Snow reportedly came down heavily for about 45 minutes in areas of the summit, Empire Grade Road, Bonny Doon and portions of the San Lorenzo Valley.

Aaron Szabo, a cook at the Summit Inn, said it was "pouring snow" at 6 p.m. He said some snow had already had a chance to stick to parked cars, although it wasn't sticking to the on highway.

The Highway Patrol reported no accidents, saying motorists slowed down appropriately.

Mike Spaan, an engineer at the Department of Forestry's Burrell Station on the summit, said the snow really came as a surprise.

"One minute it just started getting a little cloudy, and the next, snow was coming down like a bat out of hell," he said. "There was thunder and lightening too. The snow came down really hard for 15 minutes, enough to stick on the ground."

Bob Sohl, Sentinel weather-watcher in Bonny Doon, said what little snow that stuck on the ground at the 1,800-foot elevation level was melting a little while later. By 7 p.m., he said, "There's only stars in the skies."

If the snow surprised locals, it really came as a surprise to weather forecasters. Sunday, Santa Cruzans were basking in 66-degree sunny weather, with the forecast calling for mostly sunny, if windy weather, for the next several days.

Robert Brown, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in Redwood City, said Monday's storm was a surprise — the cold rain and snow in some areas snuck in the back door, coming from a low-pressure system in Nevada as opposed to the arctic or Pacific Northwest.