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Wild, woolly, and gone

Nor'easter takes its toll on region, but the timing tempers impact

By Michael Levenson and Noah Bierman
Globe Staff / December 28, 2010

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The storm that socked Massachusetts the day after Christmas knocked out power for tens of thousands, flooded towns along the South Shore, ignited scattered house fires, stranded travelers, and strained countless backs and knees with record-setting snows piled high by blowing winds.

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But the timing of the mammoth nor'easter, at the end of a holiday weekend when schools are out and many people are on vacation, meant area residents were able to hunker down at home and stay off the roads. And ample warning from meteorologists gave crews plenty of time to treat roadways.

The storm did not cause any reported deaths in the state. Car crashes were minimal. It was, for many, an extended holiday, a chance to nibble on leftovers and let the children play with new toys, or romp outside with saucers and sleds.

By the time the storm rumbled out of Massachusetts and into northern New

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snowboarding skills to his parents, as he raced down a hill, picking up speed with every passing inch before launching off a mogul built by other children.

"Watch me jump in the air!" he shouted.

The snow that trapped many here also stranded Bostonians in distant locales.

Tom O'Keefe found himself yesterday in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., digging out his car in soggy canvas Converse sneakers and wishing he were back in Boston. Alge Crumpler, the New England Patriots tight end, was, along with the rest of his team, in Rochester, N.Y., unable to return from Buffalo after beating the Bills. Instead, Crumpler found himself buying his teammates lunch at Dinosaur Bar-B-Que. And James Wooten, who lives in the Back Bay, was stuck watching Western movies with family in New York City.

Like many, he was ready to come home.

"It's nice to have the extra day with family, so I'm enjoying it," he said. "But I do need to get back tomorrow for work."

At its peak, during the early hours yesterday, 55,000 people lost power, mostly in Southeastern Massachusetts, as snow and high winds overtook power lines and downed utility poles.

Scituate was the hardest-hit community in Eastern Massachusetts. Several dozen residents were rescued from flood waters in pontoon boats, and two houses caught fire.

Scituate and other South Shore towns opened temporary shelters for 65 people whose homes had been flooded or lost power. But even in those areas,

England yesterday afternoon, it had dumped 18.2 inches of snow in Boston, making it the city's 10th largest snowfall since the National Weather Service began keeping official records in 1892.

After all data are in, the storm may qualify, officially, as a blizzard, by meeting two criteria: sustained wind gusts of 35 miles per hour and visibility of less than a quarter-mile for three consecutive hours, according to Nicole Belk, a weather service meteorologist in Taunton.

Large swaths of the city felt like a ghost town yesterday, with only a handful of people trekking to work or shoveling out. In West Roxbury, Lyn Brides shoveled for three hours, while swapping stories about grandchildren with her neighbors.

"It was nice bonding over a shovel with them," said Brides, a 59-year-old paralegal.

"It was not that it was particularly heavy," she said. "It's just that there was a lot of it."

On Boston Common, the storm gave Quinn Cousineau the chance to show off his



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most toughed it out under blankets or found refuge with relatives.

Officials attributed the relatively low amount of overall property damage to the accurate forecasts, which allowed them to salt and plow roads before, during, and after the storm, and gave residents time to get out of the way. At the storm's peak, the state deployed nearly 4,000 trucks and plows to salt and clear roads.

"We just dodged a bullet here, and we're happy to say that," said Colonel Marian J. McGovern, superintendent of the Massachusetts State Police. She said there were about 100 spinouts across the state, but no serious injuries on the roads. A tractor-trailer on Interstate 495 in Westborough overturned Sunday night, spilling some fuel but causing no delays. A truck crashed on Route 9 in Newton, taking down two electrical poles.

"We're very, very fortunate the storm hit on a day that most people had off," McGovern said.

She and other officials urged commuters today to drive slowly and expect icy roads, and to take public transportation, if possible. Still, officials were not expecting significant problems.

"People should expect a regular commute," said Jeffrey B. Mullan, the state's transportation secretary, who cautioned that drivers still "need to be safe."

The MBTA experienced periodic delays of 30 to 60 minutes on buses and commuter rail trains, but the delays were diminishing throughout the day yesterday, according to Sean McCarthy, director of the operations control center. Subways were particularly hassle-free, especially when compared with the system in New York, which experienced serious storm-related disruptions.

"We didn't have any significant delays, where a train was stuck in the neighborhood of 25 to 30 minutes, which we historically have had in weather like this," McCarthy said.

The MBTA used extra overnight crews to run empty subway trains and other equipment over its tracks to keep them free of snow and falling debris. The snow trains, as they are known, were expected to run again last night.

MBTA subway lines were expected to be fully operating this morning, except on the Mattapan High Speed Line, which is not expected to resume service until this afternoon.

In a sign of the improving conditions, Mayor Thomas M. Menino of Boston lifted the city's parking ban at 6 p.m. yesterday, 27 hours after it went into effect. Menino said he would give residents 48 hours — until 6 p.m. tomorrow — to reserve their parking spaces with trash cans and lawn chairs before those makeshift space savers will be carted off by city crews.

Major arteries in Boston should be clear this morning, but smaller neighborhood roads may take time to plow, said Jim Mansfield, director of community affairs for the Boston Transportation Department. By yesterday, the city had ticketed 2,027 cars and towed 627 for violating emergency parking rules.

Flights to and from Logan International Airport, which was virtually shut down throughout the storm, resumed yesterday afternoon. But passengers have been told that the storm caused so many delays along the eastern seaboard that they may not be able to find an available flight until Friday. Amtrak, which suspended service Sunday night, began running trains between New York and Boston again yesterday.

David Filipov, Joseph T. Sullivan, and James Vaznis of the Globe staff and Globe correspondents Matt Rocheleau and Emma R. Stickgold contributed to this report. Michael Levenson can be reached at mlevenson@globe.com. ■

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