# 2026 so far: hottest and driest in U.S. history

***After a season-defying March heat wave pushed things into overdrive, it's an open question – and a crucial one – how soon more generous moisture might arrive.***

by **Bob Henson** April 8, 2026

Last month was the warmest March in records for the contiguous United States in national-scale data going back 132 years, according to NOAA's monthly U.S. climate summary issued on April 8. The crowning event was a two-week heat wave that smashed thousands of daily and monthly heat records at hundreds of locations around the country.

March's average 48-state temperature of 50.85 degrees Fahrenheit (10.47°C) came in ahead of the 50.40°F set in March 2012 – a month that itself featured an unprecedented March "warm wave." The main difference was that March 2012's warmth was centered toward the Midwest and Northeast, whereas the heat in 2026 was focused toward the Southwest. So even though the departures from average (anomalies) were comparable in both events, the hotter starting-point climate of the Southwest allowed readings to soar well above 90°F in many places and above 100°F in more than a few spots. (See our detailed post of April 3, where we ranked these heat waves as two of the six most astounding global climate events of this century thus far.)

***Update:*** *Last month's departure from the average 48-state U.S. temperature for March – 9.35°F above the 20th-century norm – was the largest for any calendar month on record, topping the 8.9°F from March 2012. "What we experienced [last month] across the United States was unprecedented," Shel Winkley (Climate Central) told the Associated Press. As our own Jeff Masters put it in the same article, "climate change is kicking our butts."*

Astonishingly, the 48-state U.S. average temperature was the hottest on record for *all* intervals ending last month (i.e., Feb.-Mar. 2026, Jan.-Mar. 2026, etc.) going all the way back to the 12-month period from April 2025 through March 2026. The same holds true even for the past 18-, 24-, 36-, and 48-month periods, as depicted in the Climate at a Glance plotting tool from NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information.

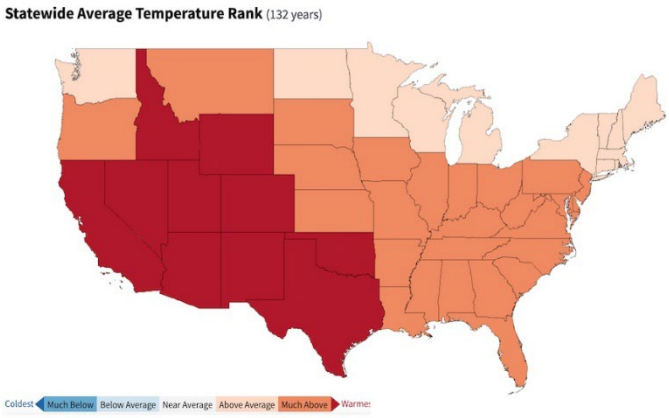

Figure 1. Statewide average temperature rank for March 2026 across the 132 years of national data going back to 1895. States in dark red had their warmest March on record. (Image credit: NOAA/NCEI)

Ten U.S. states from the Southern Plains across the Rockies to California and the Desert Southwest had their warmest March averages on record (see Fig. 1 above). Each of those states also had its hottest single-location, single-day March temperature on record, as did seven other states in the Plains and Midwest, as shown in Fig. 2 below.

In 35 of the 48 contiguous states, the statewide average reading was among the top-ten warmest for any March. Not a single contiguous state was cooler than average. (Much of this winter's cold in North America has stayed bottled up in Canada and Alaska. Though not included in the contiguous U.S. report, Alaska had its fourth coldest March on record and its 14th coldest Jan-to-Mar period.)

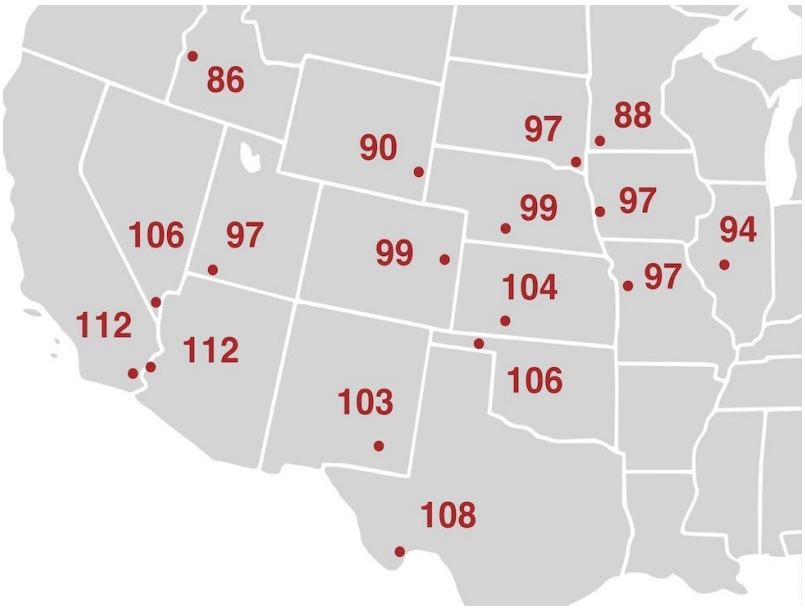


Figure 2. The 17 states where March 2026 tied or exceeded the highest single-location daily high temperature ever officially observed in any March in that state.

Below is how the heat records from U.S. observing sites, based on daily highs (maxima) and lows (minima), stacked up for March 2012 and March 2026, drawing on data from NOAA's U.S. Daily Records website compiled and analyzed by meteorologist Guy Walton (guyonclimate.com). According to Walton, last month produced more monthly heat records for both maxima and minima than any other month in the NOAA database.

Since it takes a while for all reports to come in for a month that just ended, notes Walton, "I wouldn't be surprised if daily totals for March 2026 end up surpassing daily totals for March 2012."

| ***Record type*** | ***March 2012*** | ***March 2026*** |
|---|---|---|
| Daily warm-max records: | 13,208 | 12,347 |
| Daily warm-min records: | 12,867 | 10,197 |
| Monthly warm-max records: | 1066 | 2596 |
| Monthly warm-min records: | 1016 | 1263 |

The widespread U.S. warmth has given plants across much of the country a startlingly early start. Trees and shrubs have been leafing out three to four weeks ahead of average over parts of the Central Plains, including Denver, and much of the South has seen blossoms emerging 10 to 20 days earlier than usual.

**A distressingly dry March and year to date**

Last month was the sixth driest March in 48-state U.S. history, according to NOAA, with a national average of 1.83 inches (46.5 millimeters). The only drier March in this century so far was in 2013.

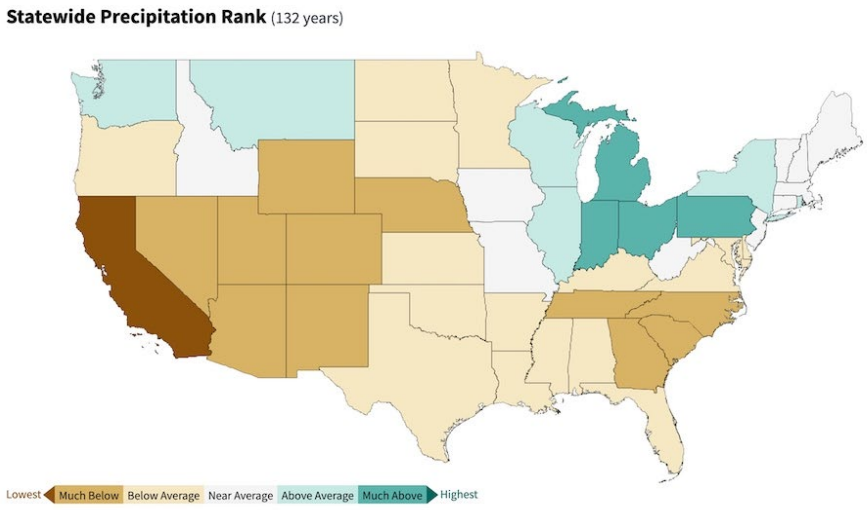


Figure 4. Statewide average precipitation rank for March 2026 across the 132 years of national data going back to 1895. (Image credit: NOAA/NCEI)

As is often the case, the precipitation map for March is quite varied. California was record-dry, and eight other states had a top-ten-driest March (Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah). The only wetter-than-average states were Washington and Montana, along with a handful of others from the Great Lakes to the Northeast. Michigan had its third-wettest March on record, but no other states had a top-ten wettest March.

The nationally averaged precipitation total for 2026 to date (see Fig. 5 below) is an ominous one: a mere 4.79 inches. **That's the lowest value on record for any January-to-March interval, including such notoriously dry periods as the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.** The previous record low was 5.27 inches, set in Jan.-Mar. 1910.

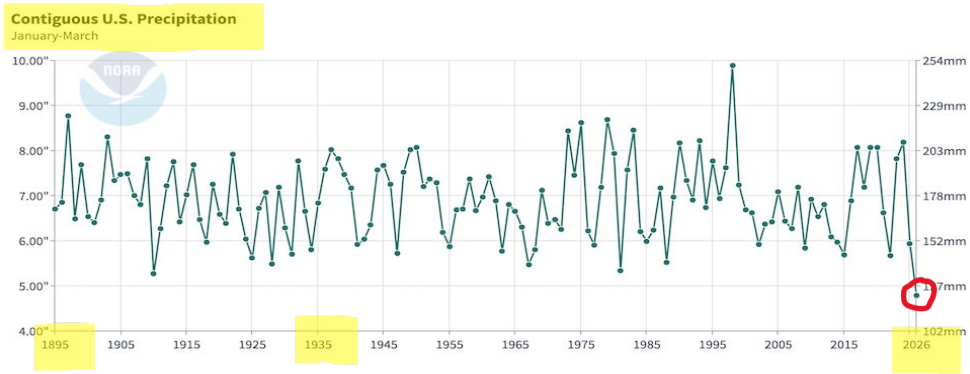

Figure 5. Precipitation averaged across the contiguous U.S. for the first quarter of each year (Jan.-Mar.) going back to 1895. (Image credit: NOAA/NCEI)

The combined effects of the record warmth and record-low precipitation have pushed more than 80% of the contiguous U.S. into abnormal dryness or drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. Across the 26 years since the Drought Monitor began, only 12 other weeks have seen this extent of national dryness (D0-D4 on the Drought Monitor scale).

As of April 7, more than a third of the country (34.68 percent) was in severe to exceptional drought (D2-D4) – a jump of 5 percent in just one week.

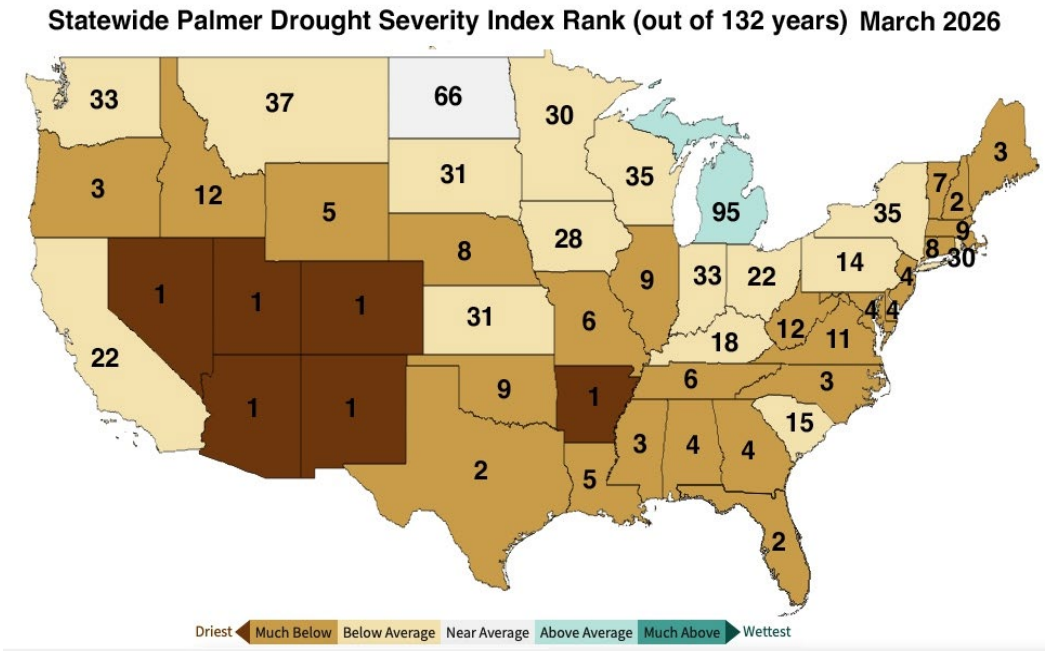


Figure 6. Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) by state in March 2026. Six states experienced their most severe March droughts on record, with 22 others experiencing a top-10 worst March drought on record. Only Michigan had an above-average lack of drought. The Palmer index incorporates both temperature and precipitation to estimate the overall moisture deficit affecting agriculture, ecosystems, and water storage. PDSI is an integrative measure of drought, so the numbers take into account dryness over multiple months. (Image credit: NOAA).

**Wetter times may lie ahead – but how soon?**

Forecast models depict some hope of moisture for California over the next week or two. And there are increasing signs that a strong El Niño event will be taking shape over the next few weeks and months (see our post from April 6). If so, that could help bring much-needed moisture across the U.S. Sunbelt, especially toward fall and into winter. El Niño's effects on U.S. climate are more muted during summer, but the April seasonal forecasts from the North American Multi-Model Ensemble models (NMME) project above-average precipitation spreading across much of the United States by late summer (August-October).

Seasonal forecasting skill remains limited, especially during the summer months, but this at least offers some hint of potential relief – albeit not soon enough to address what could be major wildfire, agriculture, and water-supply problems from later this spring into early summer.

Article link: https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2026/04/the-year-so-far-hottest-and-driest-in-u-s-history/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20260410%20Friday%20newsletter&utm_source=e007cd04ee&utm_source=Weekly+News+from+Yale+Climate+Connections&utm_campaign=249ab48831-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2026_04_09_06_14&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-249ab48831-515622009