

Nfld. & Labrador

On 'very thin ice': Warm winter causing problems along Labrador's north coast

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Ice will likely be thinner throughout the season: Canadian Ice Service

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With only thin sea ice so far this winter in Nain, it's not yet safe to install smart buoys, like this one, that collect data and help people travel safely over the ice. (SmartICE)

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comments

Elsie Hunter had a very different snowmobile ride to the cabin from her home in Nain this past Christmas.

"It was quite an adventure travelling over the hills.... I'm used to travelling on the ice and having the ice road, and it's flat, and the conditions are completely different than travelling over the hills," Hunter said in a recent interview with CBC News.

The overland adventure didn't happen just to spice up Hunter's trip. Ice travel, and the ice road, are no-gos so far in Nain this winter, and Hunter said she's not the only one altering routes or forsaking them altogether, with many locals facing conditions far outside the norm.

"It's a completely different year here up in Nain. It's a harder year," she said.

A harder year, and a much warmer one. According to the Canadian Ice Service, all of Labrador has been averaging four degrees Celsius above normal since mid-December.

"It has been a very warm winter so far, yes, and has been rightfully noted as translating into lesser and thinner sea ice," said Brad Drummond, a senior ice forecaster with the service.

Those temperatures, along with storm systems that have broken up ice in its fragile forming stage, mean ice coverage is lagging about two to three weeks behind what's typical, said Drummond, although he noted that what constitutes "typical" is changing.

"We can and have seen some slower starts in recent years, so in kind of a short-term history, this is becoming more normal," he said.

Rex Holwell of Nain has been watching the sea ice shift for decades.

"When I was young, we were on the sea ice sometimes as early as the end of November. But conditions with climate change happening the way it is, I mean, last year I wasn't on the sea ice until late January," he said.

Sensor program stalled

The season's sluggish start is affecting Holwell's work with the SmartICE program in Nain, which deploys sensors — known as smart buoys — each winter to gauge conditions and provide data in order to travel safely on top of the ice.

But that data isn't available yet, because the ice hasn't been thick enough to drill down and install them. Instead, Holwell, SmartICE's operations lead for Nunatsiavut, is keeping an eye on the app Siku, which catalogues satellite imagery of sea ice, for signs of when he may be able to make the necessary trip offshore.

So far, what Howell sees isn't encouraging.

"Looking at this imagery now, I wouldn't venture to go where I went last year. Because according to this image it's all just really very, very thin ice," Holwell told CBC Radio's *Labrador Morning*.

Ice thickness on the northern coast of Labrador at this time of year should roughly be around 30 centimetres, according to the Canadian Ice Service. It's nowhere near that yet; Drummond estimates it at 20 centimetres at most. That's not enough to support even ice skaters, according to the Canadian Red Cross, whose guidelines state 25 centimetres of thickness is needed to withstand the weight of a snowmobile.

The SmartICE program is set to expand to Makkovik and Postville this year and begin cataloguing their ice data. But Howell said from talks to those communities, they're seeing the same ice coverage, leaving it unclear when their buoys will be in place.

Beyond the buoys, Holwell worries about the impact such thin coverage is having on the north coast's isolated communities.

"Food insecurity is a huge factor," he said. "So the ability of not being able to travel on the sea ice to your traditional hunting and fishing grounds, that's gonna have a huge impact on those people who rely on basically our highway, to go hunting and fishing to offset the cost of living in Labrador."

He said most people he knows are sticking closer to the shoreline, and urges them to use Siku for its snapshots of the sea ice until things set in.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/sea-ice-labrador-coast-2021-1.5877188>

That could be a while. While Arctic ice is moving down toward Labrador, Drummond said warmer than normal temperatures are in the forecast for Labrador until at least early February, and even once the ice sets and stays in, chances are it won't be as strong.

"Looking at the season so far, we're expecting at least thinner ice than typical," Drummond said.

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