

Winter snows may mean higher water levels

- Mostly system snows should improve levels, scientists say

By LINDA GALLAGHER

MANCELONA-The sounds and sights of thawing snowbanks, as well as seasonal road limits once again in force, means spring is on the way in Antrim County as well as on the calendar.

That melting precipitation could mean a lot more than just the imminent appearance of wildflowers and robins. It could also mean higher water levels for Wetzel Lake, Sand Lake, Lake Harold and other Antrim County pothole lakes.

Antrim's snowfall this winter hasn't, so far at least, been particularly record-breaking, with slightly more than 150 inches hitting the ground as of this week, as opposed to last season's total (on April 12) of 172 inches.

But it has been mostly what scientists call "good" snow-system snow.

"System snow is snow created from precipitation from the Gulf of Mexico, not lake effect snows created in Lake Michigan, which actually lower Great Lakes levels," said Keith Kompoltowicz of the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers. "Although we have seen some lake effect snows, we haven't seen a lot."

In fact, whereas Lake Michigan normally loses about .4 inches of water each February, this year, it gained about two inches.

Which could mean higher water levels in many of Antrim County's smaller lakes, including Thayer Lake, Birch Lake, and Toad Lake.

With water levels controlled by dams in Bellaire and Elk Rapids, property owners on Antrim's chain of lakes won't see much of an increase, the scientist said. "The largest improvement will be primarily visible on the 'pothole' lakes fed solely by groundwater and precipitation."

That doesn't mean our water levels will be back to normal. Lake Michigan, the indicator used throughout northwestern lower Michigan by the Corps and U.S. Geological Survey, is still about 20 inches below its long-term mid-March level and is about five inches lower than a year ago.

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Lake Michigan is predicted to rise another three inches in March, while it normally rises about two inches.

"It looks like for both Lake

Michigan and Lake Huron that we're getting a little bit closer to being above where we were last year, given the trend of continued above-average system snow precipitation," Kompoltowicz said.

Six-month lake level forecasts produced for the Corps, which offer predicted high and low ranges for water levels, show that the current trend should continue, Kompoltowicz continued. "We're no longer forecasting that we will be reaching any record lows in any scenario. It's been such a good winter that we're no longer expecting to come close to those."

Earlier in the winter, the scientist had guessed that it might take until midsummer to get away from the possibility of record lows, but the system snows have changed that as well. "February's precipitation made the outlook significantly better for rising lakes," he said. "In the latest forecast we're very similar to where we were last year by the May-June time frame."

Lake level forecasts continued to improve in early March after the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center updated its one-month outlook for the month from near normal precipitation to above average precipitation.

And all that melting snow should only continue to make our walks to the water's edge on lakes like Sand Lake and Lake Harold a bit shorter this summer. Said Kompoltowicz, "It's like a huge donation from the Gulf of Mexico."