

Unusual weather news from Switzerland

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UNUSUAL WEATHER NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND

Talking about the weather is supposed to be the prerogative of the English. But the news from Switzerland has been so extraordinary that it is well worth looking back. It was cold in June, with the exception of a ten-day period in the middle of the month. It was colder on average, in fact, than at any time since 1864. Lack of rain marked the early summer, too, again well below the average. But owing to the cold there was snow even in some lower regions, an event which had so far never been known in June. In July there was real drought in several districts. Low-lying parts had as little as one-fifth of the normal rainfall. As to sunshine, only the Ticino and the Lake of Geneva had any worth talking about.

And then came August, with extremely warm weather, more sunshine everywhere than the average for the last hundred years. In Basle 36.1 degrees were registered on 13th August, the highest ever recorded, and the town had 306 hours of sunshine in four weeks — nearly 100 more than the average. Similar conditions reigned in other towns, especially Geneva and Neuchâtel. In the Valais the heat was such that railway lines got bent and cattle had to be taken down from the alpine pastures.

There were some heavy thunderstorms which did a lot of damage to crops and houses. One of the worst-hit places was Stein-am-Rhein. Much damage was caused, too, by hailstorms, especially in Glarus and along the Rhine towards Eglisau — both districts which have had no hail worth mentioning for decades. Damage through hail, however, was on the whole rather less than other years. In the Valais several earth tremors were registered, and in the Grisons subsidence of soil caused much destruction.

September was very much divided into a warm and a cold half. It was still dry, especially in the Valais. The rain deficit was carried over into October, though in the North-East there was just enough rain for the crops to develop. Much sunshine again in most parts — Zurich, for instance, had 154 hours, an amount which has only twice been surpassed in October since records were started in 1864.

The drought has had very serious repercussions on the agricultural output. The cherry harvest in Baselland improved after a bad start, and the grape harvest was quite good. In general, all fruit harvesting was satisfactory, only apricots in the Valais were poorer in quality. The dairy farmers, however, had and still have great worries. Some of the winter stocks of hay had to be used in September and October and fodder had to be imported later. Many cattle cisterns in the Jura were empty and water had to be transported up to the pastures. The second grain harvest in parts of the Jura was completely destroyed by drought.

Many forests caught fire in the Valais and Neuchâtel. The water level of the Doubs sank so low that one could walk from Switzerland into France along the waterfall without getting wet. In the Val-de-Travers two hydro-electric power stations had to be closed. Water consumption was severely restricted or rationed in several parts, no baths and no washing of clothes was allowed. In the Ticino special prayers were said during mass (“ad petendam pluviam”) as the grass was literally burnt.

As a result milk production was down — in some districts there was a daily shortage of as much as 50,000 litres, and a “Fernmilchplan”, a scheme for milk transport and allocation in the worst-hit parts, was put into operation. Milk was sent daily by road and rail from the

North-East, Central Switzerland and the Canton of Berne to other parts of the country — 150,000 litres a day — a feat of organisation.

The bad conditions also affected the meat market and special measures had to be taken. Cattle stocks may have to be reduced in some regions, unless the water position improves and enough fodder is imported. Arrangements for importing cooking butter have been made. Generally speaking, the strange conditions in agriculture have allowed a reasonably good year for farmers, though at great cost.

November brought some terrible gales (Föhnstürme). “The Times” reported on 8th November:

FORESTS FLATTENED BY ALPINE GALES

Forests have been flattened, buildings damaged, and road and rail traffic held up by gales of up to 137 m.p.h. in the Alps. The gales have been blowing for some days now.

On the Sanetsch Pass (7,330ft.), in canton Valais, a hut housing 40 workers building a hydro-electric plant collapsed on top of its occupants. They were all injured, but they had to spend the night in the open before being rescued and taken to hospital.

In the Chamonix valley last night about 100 houses had their roofs blown off, and on the slopes of the Brevent mountain more than 1,000 fir trees were uprooted. In the neighbourhood of Mürren and Wengen, in canton Berne, many roofs were blown off, barns blown over, and train services held up.

In the Saane valley and near Lenk, also in canton Berne, whole forests were flattened. The wind also destroyed about 40 chalets.

This gives only a small idea of what happened. The reports from Switzerland which the Editor received spoke of some tragic conditions and tremendous damage especially in the Bernese Oberland, Fribourg, Central Switzerland, also in Glarus, Zug, Solothurn, St. Gall and the Vaud and Valais. The damage will amount to several million francs. Authorities have had to take immediate relief action to help the stricken communities. The Vaudois government have asked the Confederation to restrict wood imports as there will be an abundance of wood from the ravaged forests.

In November there was still a marked lack of rain, which was worsened by the cold. In La Brevine, which has been called the Swiss Siberia, the farmers were forced to get water from the Lake des Taillères. But ice began to form on the surface and has brought additional difficulties. Frost has caused widespread damage. On 7th November heavy snow in the Valais lay as low as 1,000 m., and a week later the town of Berne had the first snow. Since then much snow has fallen in Switzerland, and seventeen passes were closed to motoring by 22nd November. Several road accidents have been reported which were due to wintry weather.

A heavy winter with much snow is forecast, good for the tourist industry, but bad for the poor farmers, who fear that the water transport by trucks to the upper regions affected by the drought might be stopped by the snow.

To finish, a strange report from Waldstatt (Appenzell AR). From a peach tree growing on a sheltered southerly slope 10 kg. of ripe fruit could be harvested and carried into the warm house just as heavy snow began to fall. “Nature’s strange moods” the report said. Strange indeed — and yet how grateful may we be that it is not mankind that makes the weather; the confusion would no doubt be immeasurably greater!

[A.T.S.]