

Extreme Michigan Weather: The Wild World of the Great Lakes State

Paul Gross

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The University of Michigan Press, 2010

Q&A with Paul Gross, author of *Extreme Michigan Weather*



Don't like the weather in Michigan? Wait ten minutes.

It's an old joke, but one that shows how temperamental the weather in the Great Lakes State can be—and how much the residents enjoy talking about it. Paul Gross, a popular Detroit television meteorologist, shows readers exactly how extreme the weather in Michigan can be, from heat waves to bitter snows, ice storms to tornadoes, floods to high winds.

He delves into the mysteries of extreme weather, explaining how the state's harshest extremes and biggest storms come to be, helping readers to understand and truly appreciate what greets them when they step outside each day. Weather in Michigan is memorable—nearly everyone can remember when an ice storm knocked out power for a week, when lightning hit a tree nearby, a snowstorm interrupted big plans, or record high temperatures allowed people to play golf in January. This is an opportunity to understand how those things are possible.

Here to talk with us about his new book *Extreme Michigan Weather* is Paul Gross. Gross is a Certified Consulting Meteorologist who works as a broadcast meteorologist for WDIV-TV, Detroit, Michigan.

University of Michigan Press: Why are Michiganians so obsessed with the weather?

Paul Gross: Because Michigan gets virtually every kind of weather...from ice storms to tornadoes, from severe cold to extreme heat, and from snow storms to floods. The only thing we don't get are hurricanes, but even the remnants of hurricanes sometimes hit Michigan! There's an old saying that "variety is the spice of life," and the incredible variety in our weather is what makes Michiganians so obsessed with it.

UMP: What is the most common question viewers ask you?

PG: I am most frequently asked "Is global warming real?"

UMP: How do you answer that question?

PG: I am a nationally recognized expert at communicating the science of global warming, and without question, the single biggest misconception by the public is that they think there is a big disagreement among scientists on this issue. The truth is that most of the climate scientists worldwide are in strong agreement that our planet is warming at a very unusual rate, and that humans are the proximate cause

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of this warming. Most of those who express strong skeptical opinions about global warming are either non-scientists, are people that attack the science because the potential policy recommendations go against their strong political philosophies, or are people being paid by organizations that represent businesses who have a financial vested interest in the policy recommendations due to global warming. I devoted an entire chapter about the truth of global warming, which one scientist who proofread it said is one of the best explanations of the subject he's ever seen. The warming is real, and will have real consequences (some of which are already happening, as I describe in the book).

UMP: Why did this book take three years to write?

PG: Because I had to research the record highs, lows, precipitation and snowfall for each day of the year for twenty-two different cities around the state, which will allow people to see just how extreme the weather can be near where they live. These statistics were not available in an Excel spreadsheet format that I could just import into my computer...I had to manually type them into my manuscript, and I'll save you from doing the math: this involved hand typing over 30,000 individual statistics, and I discovered that some of them were wrong! For example, the records indicated several days of June snow in Harbor Beach, which obviously was incorrect. I contacted the National Weather Service and the National Climatic Data Center to correct all of these errors, which has significantly improved the database.

UMP: What weather event in our state's history do you consider to be the one that had the most widespread impact?

PG: In terms of overall impact on the largest number of people, there's no question that it was the Heat Wave of 1936. Temperatures reaching 100 degrees surged all the way upstate...even the Upper Peninsula wasn't spared.

Obviously, the worst heat was in the south, where Detroit had SEVEN consecutive days with highs above 100, and, remember, that we didn't have air conditioning in those days. The death toll was tremendous, and the entire state suffered.

UMP: What do you recall as the most dramatic weather event you've personally covered?

PG: Probably the first two weeks of 1999, when we had one of the harshest two-week stretches of winter weather that we've ever experienced. We've certainly had more severe outbreaks of snow, wind, cold in our state's history, but this one lasted for two weeks. I was reporting for WDIV-TV outside in that weather for most of those two weeks, and I'll never forget it. One especially memorable moment came when a viewer e-mailed me that the advice I gave on one of our morning newscasts while reporting out in that severe winter weather actually saved her life.

UMP: We always hear about tornadoes down in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas...but do we need to be THAT concerned about tornadoes here in Michigan?

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PG: Absolutely. There's no denying that they get many more tornadoes down there, but a higher percentage of our tornadoes up here have the potential to be strong or violent...and those are the twisters that do the most damage and kill the most people. Because it's been so long, many people don't realize that the ninth deadliest tornado in American history occurred right here in Michigan on June 8, 1953. That twister struck the Flint suburb of Beecher, and is still the last single tornado in America to kill over 100 people. It is not a matter of "if," but "when" another tornado like that will hit our state. This time, however, we have the ability to warn people ahead of time to take cover, and, in the case of violent tornadoes like this, our powerful Doppler radars give us ten minutes or more warning BEFORE the tornado even touches down.

UMP: As an amateur historian, you've researched a lot of historical Michigan weather events. Which one do you find the most fascinating?

PG: The Great Lakes Storm of 1913, also called the "White Hurricane" by some. This massive "gale of November" generated hurricane force winds over Lake Huron for twelve straight hours, and sank eight freighters, killing over 200 seamen...still one of the worst maritime disasters in American history. Meteorologist Mal Sillars and I researched the meteorological history of that storm, and it was tremendously interesting to hand plot the weather maps from copies of the original November 1913 surface weather observations.

UMP: What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

PG: Not only a greater appreciation for all of the weather we get here in Michigan, but also a greater respect for how we meteorologists forecast the weather. Meteorologists nowadays are very accurate...rarely does a forecast go completely awry. People intuitively expect us to be right, which is why nobody says a word when we forecast big storms correctly. However, just a small error in the forecast amount or timing of some incoming rain or snow will bring very angry e-mails and phone calls...you wouldn't believe some of the profanity I receive. I am confident that if people actually understood how a meteorologist forecasts the weather (which I do describe in great detail in the book), they would better appreciate the challenge of what we have to do."

UMP: I understand that you are extra proud about one other aspect of your book?

PG: Absolutely. This is the first-ever comprehensive book about Michigan weather...it's OUR book, but in more ways than one. Our economy is in terrible shape right now, so it was VERY important to me to keep every job associated with this book in Michigan. My publisher, the University of Michigan Press, is in Ann Arbor, and the printer that will produce the book is not far away. I am beaming with pride that this Michigan book has been made by Michigan workers...it really is OUR book.

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