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Posted on Sun, Aug. 3, 2008

An endless bummer: Air is hot; surf is not

2008 is sweltering, but ocean temps take a dip.

By Anthony R. Wood
Inquirer Staff Writer

For two months now, the water temperatures at the Jersey Shore have been just about normal - for the coast of Maine.

Meanwhile on the mainland, this has been one of the hottest summers ever.

"It's blazing hot," said Stewart Farrell, a professor of marine and coastal sciences at Richard Stockton College, near Atlantic City. But "by the time you get to the beach, it's cold and foggy."

While surf temperatures flirt with the seasonal record low of 63.6 (set in 1988), New Jersey has baked in the warmest June-July period in 113 years of record-keeping. In Philadelphia, the June-July stretch was the fourth warmest in 135 years - tied with the 1934 Dust Bowl summer.

Forecasts call for August to open with a hot week,



Chilling at the beach is leaving oceangoers cold. Low temps were blamed for a massive tilefish kill in the summer of 1882.

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followed by more dog-day afternoons until month's end.

For Shore visitors, the irony is cruel: Go to the beach to escape hyperthermia - and risk hypothermia.

Coastal scientists and weather experts say the icy water and oppressive air are inextricably linked.

"The warmer summers have some of the coldest coastal ocean water," said David A. Robinson, a Rutgers University professor and the state climatologist.

The same persistent winds from the south and southwest that are yanking warm surface water from the South Jersey coast have blanketed the land with thick, tropical air.

The source of the winds is a large area of high pressure over the North Atlantic: the "Bermuda high," so called because it typically is centered near Bermuda. Winds circulate clockwise around high centers, so areas to the west experience south breezes.

"This is a very persistent southerly wind," said Scott Glenn, a Rutgers coastal scientist. South winds were reported in Atlantic City on 26 days in July, according to the National Weather Service.

Cold surf - the result of upwelling, in which chilled water rises to replace warm water at the surface - isn't unusual in South Jersey.

Summer water temperatures have plunged as low as 49, said James A. Eberwine, the marine specialist at the National Weather Service office in Mount Holly. An extreme cold-water outbreak off New Jersey in 1882 was blamed for killing 1.5 billion tilefish.

The difference this year is the duration. Farrell, who runs Stockton's Coastal Research Center, said he had seen nothing like it in at least 25 years.

From June 1 through July 21, the average surf temperature - taken in four feet of water off the old Steel Pier in Atlantic City - was 61.2 degrees, Eberwine said. It has nudged up grudgingly. Yet on Friday, the Atlantic City surf temperature of 64.6 was still 4 degrees below that off Portland, Maine.

The chilled water also has turned the Jersey Shore into San Francisco East. In tandem with the warm air, it has produced an extraordinary presence of fog, Eberwine said. Fog was reported in Atlantic City on 39 days in June and July.

Meanwhile, winds continue to rout the sun-warmed top layer of the surf - an effect similar to cooling hot tea by blowing across the surface.

The South Jersey coast, oriented from southwest to northeast, makes the warm water especially vulnerable to steady south and southwest winds. The earth's spin deflects the water seaward, Glenn said. The adventurous may be happy to know that right now the ocean is quite tepid 20 miles offshore.

As warm water vacates, it's replaced by cold-water intrusions from the Arctic regions via the Labrador current.

It has been a great year for green phytoplankton in the cool Jersey surf, Glenn said. In turn, those millions of microorganisms have inhibited warming by filtering sunlight.

Inland, the impact of the steady south winds is quite the opposite. The heat hasn't been as punishing as in the deadly summers of 1993 and 1995, but it has been enduring, abetted by dryness.

The heavier air associated with high pressure repels storms, and the region's rainfall deficit has

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grown under the Bermuda high's influence. In July, Philadelphia's rain was 75 percent of normal.

With no moisture to evaporate, the sun can heat the ground more efficiently. That helps explain why the city's average temperature in June and July was 77.8, about 3 degrees above normal.

Paradoxically, while South Jersey surf temperatures have been low, the Atlantic overall is so warm that it has inhibited strong cool fronts from pressing east, said Joe Bastardi, a meteorologist with Accu-Weather Inc., the commercial service in State College, Pa.

Since the mid-1990s, ocean temperatures from Greenland to the equator have generally been higher than average, part of a 20- to 40-year cycle known as the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation.

"That warm water has been the key to our summer," he said. "We haven't had a cool, refreshing air mass in two months."

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