

Washington's Climate

THE COCORAHS 'STATE CLIMATES' SERIES

Washington - Home of the Legendary "Rain City"

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When most people think of Washington (WA), they think of Seattle (that is, if they don't think of our nation's capitol first). When most people think of Seattle, they think of rain (hence the nickname Rain City). WA has a very rainy reputation, but is that accurate? The short answer is, well, yes **and** no! WA's climate varies dramatically across the state: some parts are very wet while some are dry. The wettest station is Forks (located on the Olympic Peninsula) with an annual average precipitation of 121.73", while the driest station, Priest Rapids Dam (located in south central WA), has an annual average precipitation of only 6.84".

It's easy to see how our statewide average annual precipitation (38.44") doesn't really do justice when explaining the climate of WA. Our state is separated by a north-south oriented mountain range, the Cascades, that drastically alter the climate between the east and the west. East of the Cascades is relatively dry, with average annual precipitation totals such as 8.26" in Yakima and 16.67" in Spokane. Other prominent features of WA are the Puget Sound and the proximity to the Pacific Ocean. While cold air masses are more common in eastern WA, allowing the temperature to be low enough for snow in winter, the Puget Sound keeps the air temperature relatively warm for the lowland locations west of the Cascades, keeping most of the winter snow-free. Rain events are much more common west of the Cascades, and is where WA gets its reputation. However, as may be a surprise to many, even Seattle with its average annual precipitation measuring 37.07", isn't as wet as some other east coast cities such as New York (49.69"), Raleigh (43.05"), and Atlanta (50.20"). Seattle's rainfall is typically light to moderate and lasts over a longer period of time, rather than the shorter, heavy rain that is more common in east coast cities. This results in many days with measurable rain during the winter, 20-25 days or more in a month is not uncommon.

The windward (west) side of the Olympic Mountains, located on the Olympic Peninsula, is where the most precipitation falls in the state, and even has a rainforest (Hoh; <http://www.nps.gov/olym/planyourvisit/visiting-the-hoh.htm>). Hoquiam and Quillayute receive 68.69" and 101.72" inches of precipitation annually, for example.

The climate of WA is much less straightforward than its reputation implies, as the precipitation varies greatly between the wet coast and the dry desert-like conditions in parts of eastern WA. Many Washingtonians don't mind, however, and like to refer to our rainy reputation as a wonderful myth to keep people out of our state!

More information about WA climate can be found at the Office of the Washington State Climatologist (<http://climate.washington.edu/>). All averages are taken from 1971 to 2000.