

# Cool! Fall has arrived

It's been hot,  
but let's not  
assign blame

**T**oday is officially the first day of fall — but the frisky weather has already started. Temperatures “plunged” into the high 60s the first three mornings of last week. The air was dry, and light breezes were blowing. Neighbors were walking in droves, and dogs were barking in glee. Even the alligator over at the lake seemed energized.

Autumn is always a great respite — especially after a scorching August.

According to the National Weather Service, Tallahassee endured its hottest August in history with an average daily high temperature of 94.8 degrees. Every day offered the potential for heat stroke.

It was the kind of month that seemed to put another log on the fire of global warming.

Not so fast, caution local scientists.

They say you should never make judgments about weather based on a single event, such as a month of record temperatures. August was hotter than normal in Tallahassee, but June and July had typical temperatures.

They note Florida actually is enjoying cooler years: The annual average temperature — which is the average of the daily highs and lows — has dropped by 1 to 3 degrees over the past century in much of Florida.

And just for fun, they note that fall has been coming earlier to Tallahassee.

So before you start looking for



**GERALD  
ENSLEY**

THE VIEW  
FROM HERE



PHIL SEARS / Democrat

These girls, cooling off in early August on Medical Commons Court, didn't need a meteorologist to tell them that last month was Tallahassee's hottest August ever.



MIKE EWEN / Democrat

Autumn can bring beautiful weather and — as in this scene at Lake Ella — beautiful colors to Tallahassee.

# ENSLEY

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examples of global warming, recognize climate is a complex matrix of factors.

"I got a call once from a man, and I was trying to explain these things," said FSU meteorology professor Jon Ahlquist. "After a while, he asked me if by any chance I was in politics. He said, 'I can't get a straight answer out of you.'"

Certainly, something is going on with our climate. Scientists have found the average temperature worldwide has increased 0.75 degrees Celsius over the past 100 years, which is significant. The ice floes in the Arctic Ocean are shrinking. Some species of birds are migrating earlier. Some plants are blossoming earlier.

Scientists are loath to assign blame when talking about global warming. They say the earth has had many periods of major natural climate changes — from ice ages to the tropical conditions in the age of dinosaurs. They agree that human impacts, such as carbon emissions from our cars and land uses that reduce climate-regulating wetlands, have played a role.

"How much is natural variation and how much is due to people is difficult to say," Ahlquist said. "It is truly a very complicated system."

What is distressing, Ahlquist said, is that there remains skepticism about global warming — a situation for which he blames the media. He acknowledged the media's responsibility to present both sides of an issue. But he suggested we often present both sides of global warming in such even-handed fashion as to suggest the "issue is still up in the air."

"When you ask what

fraction of scientists believe in one side and what fraction believe in the other side, the overwhelming majority are on one side: The majority of climate scientists believe global warming is happening," Ahlquist said.

Yet even with global warming as a fact for the planet, it does not translate into warmer weather everywhere. As noted earlier, things are cooler in Florida.

Scientists will tell you many of the increases in temperature around the nation are the result of "heat islands." That is, the concrete of heavily paved and developed urban areas collects and holds heat more than open earth. The majority of official measurements are made at airports — which increasingly are within a heat island.

"As cities develop, they tend to develop toward the airport," said Florida's state climatologist, David Zierden.

In Florida cities where that is true — Orlando, Miami, Tampa — there have been significant increases in the annual average temperatures. But at the numerous Florida weather stations located away from any heat island, there has been a decrease of 1 to 3 degrees in the annual average temperatures over

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**Jon Ahlquist**

FSU meteorology professor

the past 100 years.

Tallahassee, where the airport is still at some remove from the urban heat island, is among those experiencing a decline in average annual temperatures: 1 degree.

"A globally averaged temperature is a poor representation of the earth's climate, because there are so many regional differences," Zierden said. "(Tallahassee) temperatures have actually cooled. August is just one of those natural variations you can't read much into."

Retired Florida State geography professor and longtime weather researcher Mort Winsberg has found another interest-

ing trend: Fall is coming earlier in Tallahassee.

Winsberg's "rough and ready" definition of the start of fall is the first cold snap, which he defines as the first two consecutive days in which the morning low temperature falls below 60 degrees.

Winsberg found that, from the 1940s to the 1980s, the majority of Tallahassee's first cold spells came in October (17 of 20 in one 20-year span). Yet over the past 20 years (1987-2006), the majority of our first cold spells (12 of 20) have come in September.

Winsberg recently finished a global-warming study in which he charted long-term temperature trends at nearly 750 U.S. weather stations. He said only 80 locations had experienced a rise of 4 percent or more in their average temperatures.

"I would say the evidence is mixed (on global warming)," Winsberg said. "You can't deny something is happening to our climate. The argument is how much humans are contributing. I'm going to stay neutral on that."

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