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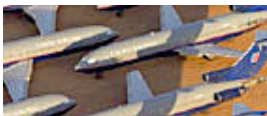
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# The full weather picture is just mouse clicks away

**By Nathan Bierma***Published January 1, 2003*

They still publish the Old Farmer's Almanac, that old-fashion miscellany of rustic wit and wisdom with the hand-drawn cover. The continent's oldest continuously published periodical still claims to hold the secrets to the skies "by the use of a secret formula devised in 1792," and testifies to humankind's long-held desire to foresee, if not control, the elements.

"We believe nothing in the universe occurs haphazardly; there is a cause-and-effect pattern to all phenomena, including weather," says the Almanac's Web site at [www.almanac.com](#). And how's this for an "extended outlook," as weathercasters say: Almanac.com offers a regional forecast for the next three months.

Since the Almanac's colonial-era founding, forecasting the weather has gotten less spiritual and more scientific, and now you can use the Web to harvest the fruits of all the gadgets and colorful maps employed around the globe. You don't have to go far to get your basic five-day forecast; most Web sites for print and broadcast media have weather pages. But you also can go straight to the sources the weathercasters use: the National Weather Service's data-rich Web site at [www.nws.noaa.gov](#), or AWS Convergence Technologies at [www.aws.com](#).

For those who like to keep an eye on the weather at all times, both The Weather Channel and AWS offer software tools to create a little weather reading on your computer desktop.

**Comprehensive information**

The AWS version is called WeatherBug, [www.weatherbug.com](#). Once you install the basic, free version, you'll see a temperature reading in your desktop tray, next to the clock. Click on it, and a sophisticated weather screen pops up.

WeatherBug's information is comprehensive, and its presentation is visually engaging, with 3-D graphics and radar. Its desktop tray icon is by far the cleanest of any tool -- two crisp, blue numerals that convey the current temperature when you're connected to the Web, usefully residing next to the time.

WeatherBug uses the AWS network of weather stations -- mostly schools and nature centers -- numbering in the thousands nationwide, including three dozen in the Chicago area. Most other weather sites simply spit back readings from the nearest airport. For example, if you're in Chicago and relying on The Weather Channel tool, its reading from Meigs Field on the lake may be a few degrees colder than WeatherBug's report from an AWS station a mile inland. WeatherBug also links to more arcane data such as pollen forecasts and UV Index reports.

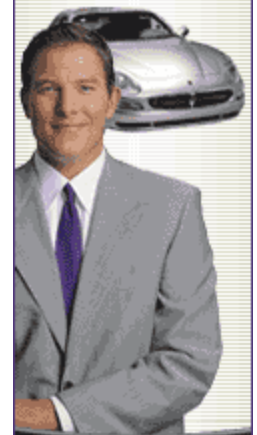
The major downside to WeatherBug is its clutter and invasive advertising. Unlike the Weather Channel tool, which also is free but separates its ads from its information, Weather Bug wraps its data window in garish ads with ugly colors. To get rid of them, you have to fork over \$19.95 for the upgrade, WeatherBug Pro.

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The Weather Channel's tool is called Desktop Weather ([www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com)). Its window is split in two; the left panel is smoothly laid out, easy for the eye to navigate, and gives priority to the important stuff. The right panel is an annoying billboard of rotating ads that hogs screen room, but because the tool is free, you're stuck with them. Equally intrusive is a five-second musical interlude the tool plays every time you start up your computer.

Plenty of maps

But the Weather Channel tool has its advantages, including access to a diverse offering of maps. Its modest and digestible layout includes attractive meter graphics for temperature, barometer and wind speed placed at the bottom. And, it links back to [weather.com](http://weather.com), one of the most informative weather sites on the Web.

If you are willing to pay for it, you can get weather information without a bombardment of ads at Weather1 ([www.weather1.com](http://www.weather1.com)). For \$18, Weather1 offers a lean but complete layout in a charming blue panel. At the price, you get more for your money than with WeatherBug Pro, as weather buffs can indulge themselves in Weather1's unparalleled database of graphics for solar images, ocean wave height, and snow cover, among other curiosities. If only Weather1 planted a continuous temperature reading in your desktop tray as the others do, instead of a lame graphic of a sun and cloud.

You can find other free, weather-related downloads at [www.webattack.com/freeware/misc/tools/fwwweather.shtml](http://www.webattack.com/freeware/misc/tools/fwwweather.shtml).

But for all the meteorological bells and whistles that make Old Farmer's Almanac seem simplistic, remember that few sites improve much upon looking out the window to see if it's snowing. As a recent newspaper ad for a gas company asked, "Once your nose hair freezes, does it really make a difference what the temperature is?"

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