Storm chasers: Thrill seekers or scientists?

By Robert Fox, The Lawton Constitution

LAWTON, Okla. — Doug Speheger, a meteorologist with the Norman Weather Center, said storm chasers can be thrill seekers or scientists — or something in between.

"It's not something people should be doing without a good background in meteorology or (understanding of) evolution of severe storms," he said.

He said storm chasers can provide research groups or the National Weather Service with information they may not otherwise get. Most of the information comes from spotters, but chasers can contribute confirmation of tornadoes, reports on hail size, wind speed and other raw data. They can act as eyes on what is happening at the moment.

When he isn't at work, Speheger is also a storm chaser. He said he's been chasing storms for about 18 years and got started as part of a severe weather research group under Oklahoma State University professor Howard Bluestein in the early '90s.

The project revolved around placing a portable Doppler radar within a few miles of tornadoes. He said now he chases storms so he can understand them better.

"(I chase for) the education," he said. "Seeing how thunderstorms evolve and change over time and (seeing) what kinds of conditions might help produce a tornado in one storm and maybe not in another storm."

The experiences in the field help him understand radar data more completely, he said.

He said he has never really feared for his life, even though a few tornadoes have passed relatively close to his position, because he was confident he chose safe locations.

"I'm not sure you can be that close to something that strong and powerful and not have something in the back of your head say 'What are we doing here?'" he said.

J. R. Hehnly, a meteorology student at the University of Oklahoma, said he had never seen a tornado until about 10 years ago when he started chasing them.

"(I was) always interested in the weather and had never seen a tornado, after having grown up in Oklahoma," he said. "I wanted to get a little bit more personal with it. I want to see tornadoes, I want to see severe thunderstorms, but I'm trying to give back to the community as well."

He said he thinks chasing storms is probably safer than scuba diving.

"As long as you know what the storm is doing, you can keep yourself out of harm's way," he said.

But he's had his share of close calls.

The closest, he said, was a night tornado in Oklahoma City on May 9, 2003. He and some other storm chasers were following a tornado on the north side of the road by way of flashes from power poles. While they were watching the north, a new tornado formed on the south side of the same road, forcing them to take cover in the hall of the first house that offered cover, he said.

"Just shows you that you think you know what's happening and at night it's a lot harder to tell if anything new is developing," Hehnly said. "We thought we were behind a tornado and ended up in front of a new tornado."

David Ewoldt is also a storm chaser. He said he first became interested in tornadoes after "Terrible Tuesday," the devastating series of tornadoes that struck the Red River Valley in 1979.

Just short of three years later he rode along on his first chase at the age of 14. He said he was fortunate enough to see a tornado his first time out.

"(There was) a feeling of disbelief, watching it (an F3 tornado) track away from us," he said.

Now a fire department dispatcher for Oklahoma City, he chases about 25 days per year. He said he had the opportunity to "pick the brains" of well-respected meteorologists in the mid '80s when he was the voice of weather radio. In that time he learned a lot about meteorology even though he never finished his degree in the science.

He said he uses the same maps and other data as meteorologists but makes his own predictions. He chases tornadoes to check his predictions.

Even with his experience and knowledge, things can still go wrong, he said.

"Sometimes it's hard to understand what part of the storm is the business part of the storm," Ewoldt said. "You can get yourself into trouble really fast. Even the most experienced chasers, at times, get themselves into positions where it's going to require quickly getting something done differently to get out of danger."

At the end of the chase, he turns over as much of his records and documentation to the National Weather Service or other research groups as he can. He said he wished more chasers would document more carefully and turn it in to weather researchers.

Jeff Snyder, a graduate meteorology student at University of Oklahoma, chases storms as a scientist and an enthusiast.

"Why do I spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours to chase storms? I chase because I am fascinated all things related to thunderstorms," he said. "Just as some people are passionate about sports, cars or some other hobby, I have a passion for the atmosphere that is difficult to describe."

He said storm chasers can play a vital role in the warning process. In the relatively unpopulated sections of the USA, storm chasers may be the only people to observe and report hazardous weather.

"Many chasers roam the Plains each year for two reasons — to quench their passion for storms and tornadoes, and to help do what they can to aide the warning process," Snyder said. As crazy as getting so close — in some cases a quarter mile — to tornadoes and violent weather may seem, a good, safe and knowledgeable storm chaser typically faces more danger driving than he does from the storm, Snyder said.

"Between animals in the roadways, cars not safely parked off the roadways, speeding to get to the destination, and hydroplaning caused by wet roads, there are, arguably, more threats to one's safety caused by driving than by the storm itself," he said.

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