



A perfect storm

Why do people put themselves in the path of nature's most violent fury for the best picture ever? Drew Turney chases down the storm chasers to find out

IT WAS THE ILL-FATED mountaineer George Mallory who answered the question "Why climb Mount Everest" with the famous response "Because it is there." It's partly a desire to understand the science of the weather that drives people to chase storms. But it's also the very human thirst for excitement. Why are we compelled to look at footage and photos of lightning and tornadoes? They're fascinating, they're dangerous and they're there. For us to see those shots and footage, some fearless soul has to stand in the path of a maelstrom. Enter the storm-chasing community, from serious scientific observers to the guys who run a website called stormgasm.com...

Getting your kit together

Photographing the weather is a lot less user-friendly than just telling Auntie Flor to sit still and smile. Even against a canvas bigger than any other – the whole sky – a storm cell can be tantalisingly uncooperative and change in a heartbeat, even after all the planning and luck used to get yourself to the right spot where a storm is at its most photogenic. Maths teacher Jimmy Deguara has been interested in the weather for as long as he remembers, an interest in various meteorological phenomena leading to his passion as a regular storm chaser. He runs the website www.australiansevereweather.com with some fellow enthusiasts and explains not just how technology can be a chaser's best friend, but how one can overdo it. "In the US they go a lot further with equipping their vehicles and it becomes a real keep up with the Joneses thing," Deguara says. "You can actually chase without a radio nowadays – there's a lot more data available to you with satellite data that comes straight down to your laptop. Some people use radio, some use mobiles, but the more you have the more can go wrong and wreck your chases by distracting you. In general you have to know the target before you get there."

Spectacular lightning strikes South China Sea near Kuala Belait, Brunei.

The shoot

So if you shouldn't arm yourself with too much in the way of maps, laptops, radio or mobile communication, what do you need to predict where a storm will be and how it will behave? "You've basically got to go and look for storms," says Melbourne-based storm chasing enthusiast Jane Gough. "You need a basic understanding of cloud structure and how a storm works to find the most photogenic part of it." Even then – unlike the movie *Twister* that popularised the field and launched thousands of ill-prepared thrill seekers across America's rural roads – no amount of data, preparation or scientific knowledge can guarantee the weather. It takes a lot of disappointing false starts, waiting and luck. A killer tornado might suddenly descend from a cloud weather radars report as benign, and hundreds of hopefuls will cluster underneath a monstrous storm where tornado activity seems certain, only for the clouds to blow away and break up. So assuming you can put yourself in the path of the much longed-for supercell storm – the kind that spawns lightning, hail and tornadoes – what should you expect? Chaser Tim Marshall became interested in severe weather after seeing an F4 tornado wreak havoc in his Illinois hometown. "Photography is very difficult while storm chasing," he says, confirming our suspicions. "You're always in a hurry so there's very little time to compose a shot. I look for windmills, farmsteads, fences, etc. to compose shots, and despite low light, poor visibility and high contrast there's usually no time to check a light meter or fool around with f-stop aperture settings. I have chargers and an inverter that can work in the car in case my spares are used up. I don't usually use filters except for a polariser occasionally and every once in a while when I have time to compose a shot, a two-stop split neutral density filter dampens the bright sky and brings out the darker foreground." As in most photography areas, digital has been nothing short of a revolution. Everyone *Capture* spoke to for this article agreed about not just the value of

RIGHT A severe tropical storm produces a barrage of lightning north of Kununurra, WA.



The Fujita tornado-intensity scale

- F0: 64-116kph winds. Light damage.
- F1: 117-180kph winds. Moderate damage.
- F2: 181-252kph winds. Considerable damage.
- F3: 254-331kph winds. Severe damage.
- F4: 333-418kph winds. Devastating damage.
- F5: 420-511kph winds. Incredible damage.

immediate feedback but the cost saving of shooting as much as you possibly can, choosing the best one or two shots from anything from dozens to hundreds. Marshall uses digital, but still goes against the grain at times. "I've amassed about 30,000 slide images," he says, "so needless to say storage is a problem. Still, it was a difficult decision to go digital as I had to sacrifice resolution and pay 10 times more for it. I changed to digital but my 6.3mp camera isn't nearly as clear as a slide image and stock agencies won't accept such low resolution, so I still carry a film camera with

me just in case I get a great photographic moment." Digital has also had unexpected benefits to image post production. Besides Deguara's claim that he used to spend at least two visits to any new developer until they got his prints right, Gough reports why digital tinkering is now de rigueur. "You can manipulate digital photos in such a way that you can still get a film 'look' about them," she says. "I used to think I'd go back to black and white film, now I enjoy making my photos black and white instead of relying on film."

As predictable as...

While Gough has just started selling gift cards of her images at a local shop, the potential for making a living from your work is limited by your time, your expenses and, increasingly, your competition. Considering some of the costs

involved in storm chasing, making money back is a great sounding proposition, but it's a big sky and a lot of chasers fit under it... "Unless you get into this in a big way you'll never pay off how much chasing you do," Deguara thinks. "The aim is to at least cover website costs. Generally the ads can pay off our website if you get enough hits, and obviously when you start to rack up fuel and supplies you want to try and get some money back. There was a demand for tornado footage once, but the invention of digital cameras and digital video has spelled the end of that."

Safe as houses

There's no limit to the lengths storm chasers will go to for a great photo. Some seem to attack the task like an episode of MTV stunt show Jackass, but the wider storm-chasing community mostly

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ABOVE A spectacular thunderstorm approaches the Gold Coast, Queensland.
All photos by Radek Dolecki www.electricskies.com.au

dismisses them. "If I'm close to lightning I won't stand outside," Gough says. "I'll always stay in the car. Safety is my priority over a money shot, so to speak." And when you're chasing storms, often the storms themselves are the least of your worries. As Marshall explains, the beast many chasers hunt is not like a killer crocodile lying in wait to strike anyone close enough, "Tornadoes are one of the least hazards due to their infrequent nature and the difficulty in getting in front of one," he says. And let's not forget, storm chasing involves careering along rain-slicked back roads in the most appalling weather conditions, trying to keep pace with storms riding driving winds. "I think the only recorded deaths from storm chases have been from car accidents," Deguara says. "One driver fell asleep at the wheel returning from a hurricane and another one crashed into a media vehicle trying to chase the same storm."

Monster stories

Of course, the one thing we couldn't wait to ask storm chasers was about their horror stories. We expected tales of being thrown through the air in their cars, hailstones the size of tennis balls smashing windscreens and lightning bolts splitting nearby trees in two. But Gough's story sums up the horrors of storm chasing perfectly. Her and some fellow chasing enthusiasts holidayed in Darwin for a week during the pre-monsoonal season when storms are most active, expecting some spectacular sightings. "There was nothing," she sighs. "We got one little convective shower and because of the way the weather patterns were that week, that was it." Far more than in most fields of photography, nature doesn't give any breaks to storm chasers. The few images on these pages are the results of years of driving around in dangerous conditions, waiting around for hours and then capturing the perfect moment out of literally thousands of exposures. When that calamitous blend of skills and luck happens, it must be like getting struck by lightning.

Storms online

www.australiansevereweather.com
www.stormtrack.org
www.stormgasm.com
www.stormygirl.net
www.stormchaser.com
www.northauschasers.com
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storm_chasing
www.electricskies.com.au

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