

Greeley man learns to make a living off of tornados

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To see video Baker shot of a
tornado, click on the Web Extras
link to the right.

Tim Baker cursed himself as the
rain outside his car turned
sideways, baseball-sized hail
pounded the ground and the local
Nebraska radio station screamed
about the F-3 tornado that was heading his way.

"Tornado"
Tim Baker
checks the
dew point
while
chasing a
storm
during a
recent
summer.



Baker of
Greeley manages to make a decent living chasing
storms by selling video he shoots of the funnels.
PHOTO COURTESY OF TIM BAKER

Stupid, stupid, stupid, Baker thought to himself. He was right. He had trapped himself behind a building in order to film an F3 funnel that was closing in fast, like a cheetah bearing down on its prey, bringing 100 mph winds that stripped the tops of the trees surrounding the farm. As the tornado bore down on him, he knew he wasn't getting away. He would just have to wait it out.



O'Neil, Neb., summer 2003
him.

Baker, 52, of Greeley used to be a pastor in Akron, when the storm-chasing bug caught him back in 1994. So he worked in a prayer or two and thought about his family.

Even so, he figured he was going to die.

The funnel screamed over him and through him, but Baker hid behind that building for a reason. He figured it would not only block the debris that would have smashed his car to bits, but it would buffer against the wind, pushing the strong winds over him rather than through



Then he glanced to his left and saw the 2-by-4 piece of wood heading for his window. At the last second, the wood dove into the ground instead of driving like a missile through the glass.

The building held. Maybe the prayers worked. The storm passed, and he realized he was going to make it.

Coldwater, Kan., April 10,
2005

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he thought.

And really, really cool.

* * *

Baker paced around his trailer in early April and checked his laptop every 30 seconds. Little colorful dots blinked across the screen. The little dots excited Baker. They meant the beginning of tornado chasing season.

"We're all on pins and needles right now," Baker said.

He means the gang of storm chasers that have made storm lurking one of the hotter activities during the spring and summer storm season. Those who don't chase tornados -- and there have been storms where Baker found himself in the middle of 300 or more vehicles, all filming the same storm -- love to watch them. His Web sites, he said, get 250,000 hits a day.

It's that fascination that drives Baker. Baker himself, of course, remains transfixed by the funnels, even though he's spotted dozens in his career. But the public's fascination is what makes his trips profitable. For Baker, storm chasing is not only fun. It's a business.

Baker can make \$600 for a minute of fresh tornado video that hasn't been shot by anyone else. His broker sells it to the TV stations. Baker's agent, and Baker himself, have good reputations, so many times, stations will buy it sight unseen.

Baker saw the movie "Twister," and that hooked him on storm chasing, in the same way that "Into Thin Air" got people into mountain climbing. When he was in Akron many years ago, he heard about a tornado and drove out to go see it. He was stunned to find a camera crew laughing at him.

"They all said they were there three hours ago," he said. "They told me they didn't wait for the storm. They said many times they were the ones issuing the warnings."

That's why Baker believes it's more accurate to call what he does "storm predicting," not chasing.

He gathers measurements and dew points and looks at the little colorful dots on the

screen from the National Weather Service. Then Baker likes to talk to the locals from the National Weather Service about what the weather usually does, rather than what it looks like it will do (usually the two don't match up). Finally, he has to guess. It's an educated guess, but a guess nonetheless. He'll drive out to a spot and hope a storm appears. Oh, and he has to hope that he picked the sweetest spot among the dozens or even hundreds of others hoping to sell shots of storms.

That takes patience, a little cunning and lots of persistence. He once followed a poofy cloud for five hours until it turned into a tornado.

"That's the ball game," Baker said. "Everyone is trying to beat each other. And everyone has a good camera these days. It makes it harder to make a living."

Yet Baker does make a living. Well, a semi-living. He would make more and work longer if he could do hurricanes, too, but his wife of 33 years, Elizabeth, put her foot down on hurricanes. When he isn't chasing tornados four months out of the year, he works at IBM doing technical support.

After he was hooked, he began to read every book he could. He looked up meteorology classes from universities and saw what textbooks the professors were requiring, and then he bought and read those books.

For the first five years, he worked tornados for three weeks a year, until he began making enough money at it to sort of support his family. He found a job at IBM for the off months. A flexible position is as important to a storm chaser as a nose for tornadoes and a good camera. He also does some public speaking and learned how to shoot fires, too (he showed up at his first fire in shorts and a T-shirt and bought a fire suit after he was first chastised and later helped by firefighters who told him what to get). He makes money off ads on his Web sites.

Finally, Baker does quite a bit of TV work. He traveled around with a French TV station, and he believes a show he helped develop -- a "Mythbusters"-type program that would show what could happen if you were trapped in a tornado -- might air in May, though he can't talk about it. He's used by several media outlets as a tornado expert.

"Some claim they chase full time," he said. "But they usually have something on the side, like a pension or something. What do you do when there's two months of no weather?"

At first, he chased on his own, but he began to bring his kids when he realized he could be safe about it. Kyle was 14 when he first started, and Krystallin started when she was 12. Both are on their own now, and Krystallin is studying broadcast journalism at the College of the Ozarks in Lookout, Mo. She cried after her first tornado, but she got too much tornado video in her blood, she told her dad when she made the decision to major in broadcasting.

Now his partner is his daughter, Kindra, 14, who traveled with him for the first time last

year to Patricia for the tornadoes down there. Kindra got her start by learning how to read radar on the home computer when he would call her from the road for help.

The road trips could be shorter. He could live in Kansas. But he likes Greeley. It's five hours from every tornado state in the country, he said. And Greeley is a big reason why he can live in a trailer park.

"We don't have many tornadoes here," he said and laughed. "That's why I live here. I don't want to die in a tornado."

He calls his job risk management. He designed a hail net he throws over his car when he's in a bad storm because insurance won't pay for chasing. He also won't risk his own neck or his children's.

Unless, of course, you're talking about that one time in Nebraska a few years ago. Baker still enjoys showing that video of his near-death experience. It was pretty cool, even though he still shakes his head at his stupidity.

"He's usually pretty careful, which is why I don't worry," Elizabeth said. "He's also got nine lives or something."

He hopes he never finds himself in that situation again.

Most of the time, anyway.

MORE ONLINE

To watch video of "Tornado" Tim Baker's near-death experience, go to www.greeleytribune.com.

You can also go to these Web sites for Tim's tornado footage:

* www.stormchasingtv.com

* www.tornadochaser.net

* www.tornadochaser.com

* www.coloradovideonews.com

* www.stormchaserstore.com
