



Residents stand atop debris from destroyed homes caused by a tornado damage in Greensburg, Kansas in May 2007. While everyone else flees an incoming storm, stormwatchers head towards it, eager to witness Nature's greatest fury first-hand.



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## From A-bombs to anvil zits: the tribal world of stormchasers

14 hours ago

TRIESTE, Italy (AFP) — They're called stormchasers, and by any yardstick, they are a strange breed: while everyone else flees an incoming storm, these individuals head towards it, eager to witness Nature's greatest fury first-hand.

Quirky, courageous or suicidal according to your viewpoint, chasers are popularly known for dramatic video footage, often snatched from a wind-tossed 4x4, as a tornado zigzags terrifyingly towards the camera.

"Severe-weather trackers," mostly amateurs, operate in a grey zone and have their own vocabulary, a hodgepodge of insider slang and official jargon.

Professional meteorologists view them with a mix of gratitude and suspicion, rather like police who deal with informers.

Trackers may deliver hard-to-get tips of an extreme weather event, but sometimes their information is hyped or unreliable.

"I distinguish between chasers and spotters -- the former tending to observe storms for their own gratification, the latter tending to do so more for the needs of the community," says Michael Branick, a meteorologist at the US National Weather Service Forecast Office.

Branick and other weather scientists trying to figure out if tornadoes are increasing in number or intensity -- a topic hotly debated this week at the European Conference on Severe Storms in Trieste -- need to be sure that what "severe-weather trackers" have spotted is the real thing.

To ensure trackers understand what they are looking at, Branick has written an online glossary to help them distinguish a debris cloud from a dust devil, and a barber's pole from a corkscrew.

A tornado, then, is a violently rotating column of air in contact with the ground and extending from the base of a thunderstorm.

Simple enough, but watch out: "A condensation funnel does not need to reach to the ground for a tornado to be present; a debris cloud beneath a thunderstorm is all that is needed," writes Branick.

Tornadoes are just one sub-species of "supercells", a term which also covers large hailstorms -- "large" as in golf balls and even baseballs -- and any manner of thunderstorms with "persistent rotating updraft."

As for clouds, "A-bombs" take their name predictably from their mushroom shape, while congestus -- a.k.a. "towering cu" (pronounced "cue") -- is said to resemble a cauliflower.

"Gunge", by contrast, sounds like what it is: anything in the atmosphere that gets in the way of storm spotting, such as fog, haze or drizzle. This is not to be confused with "popcorn convection" -- messy little storms with no redeeming qualities.

"Anvils" are flat extensions of a thunderstorm at the upper reaches of its anatomy, frequently decorated with "anvil crawlers" and "anvil zits", two kinds of lightning.

SWEAT is not a measure of how fast a chaser runs when the tables are turned and he or she is the one chased. Rather, it is the US Air Force's Severe Weather Threat index.

The crazier spotters who see storm tracking as an extreme sport have been known to do "core punches", driving a vehicle straight into the heart of a thunderstorm -- "not a recommended procedure," says Branick dryly.

Trackers clearly face multiple hazards.

One is "chaser's neck", a term coined and copyrighted by American Warren Faidley to describe "a sore, stiff neck caused by excessive head turning while chasing storms." This is a condition similar, he insists, to the strains endured by fighter pilots.

Then there is the disappointment of a "bust," or "wasted environment," when all one's storm chasing efforts come to naught.

Even worse, though, is "chaser's withdrawal": "A depressed feeling chasers develop during the

off-season, especially in the winter."



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