

Photos Document Thrill Of The Hunt For Storm Chaser

BY ART WEBER

MIRROR OUTDOOR EDITOR

Blue skies bore Allan Detrich.

He'd rather gaze at a foreboding mass of mammatus clouds on the verge of spawning a tornado.

He's the guy who goes on vacation hoping the weather's not just lousy but horrendous.

Hurricanes don't count. Hurricanes are OK, but for him, they don't elicit nearly the same degree of enthusiasm.

"They're more or less just a bunch of wind and rain," Allan said.

Now tornadoes, they're different. They're the power of nature unleashed in one violent, uncontrollable vortex that in a matter of seconds can alter everything in their path. Compared to hurricanes, tornadoes are erratic, volatile, unpredictable.

Allan's real job is as a staff photographer for *The Blade*, where he has continued to build on his reputation as one of the country's finest photojournalists. He's seen a lot in his 42 years.

"I was 11 years old when I saw my first tornado," he said. "It was the day that all those tornadoes hit Ohio, the day of the Xenia tornado.

"I watched three tornadoes come toward the town where I lived — in Attica. They formed into one, kind of skirted Attica and went over to Willard where they did a bunch of damage.

"My dad happened to be in Willard at the time. He ended up being fine, but from that day on I was just fascinated by tornadoes."

Life on the edge has always held appeal for him.

"I have been shot at while working on my job several times," Allan, 42, said. "I covered the Marines in a U.S. occupation of a country. I have covered three hurricanes and numerous tornadic outbreaks over the years.

"I'm an adrenaline junkie."

That may explain his addiction to storm chasing.

"In 1997 I wanted to do a story on storm chasers stemming from my love of tornadoes and also from seeing the movie *Twister* not too many years before," Allan said. "I did some research on the Internet and found a storm chasing forum and a group of people who were looking for other people to chase with.

"So I posted that I was looking to photograph storm chasers and, of course, these people who were just starting out said, sure, what the heck. It was a bunch of people



The second of two twisters Allan and his team tracked in May included baseball-sized hail driven sideways as the tornado crossed the road just 100 yards ahead of them. Detrich's photos are on exhibit at the National Center for Nature Photography at Secor Metropark through July.

ALLAN DETRICH 2005

from all over the country. None of them knew each other beforehand so it was kind of a gamble of everybody's part."

Every year since then, Allan has taken two weeks or

Advancing technology and growing experience has given the chasers a big boost.

"We've got real-time radar now and we're hitting the high percentage of storms," Allan said. "This year (in May) we were on every tornado warning that was out there the entire time we were there.

"A lot of it is due to

the guys in our group who predict where things are going to happen. We have two guys that when they put their heads together, I'll put them up against the government forecasters anytime. Most of the time we were out in position before any tornado warning was issued. We were there before they happened."

Tornado intensity is measured on the Fujita damage scale, which ranges from F0, winds of less than 73 miles per hour and light damage, to F5, winds over 261 miles per hour and incredible damage.

"The most powerful I've witnessed was an F3," Allan said. "I photographed the damage from the May 3, 1999 Oklahoma City tornado. That was just amazing because there wasn't even debris around. It was just gone. There would be just a slab on the ground where a house used to be. That was an F5. The winds topped out at 319 miles per hour, which is the top of the F5 scale."

He was the first photojournalist allowed to enter the demolished communities of Bridge Creek and Moore

said.

There were some moments that they feared they were too close.

"At one point there was about a minute of apprehension because the tornado was expanding so much we couldn't determine its exact movement. It was expanding so much it looked like it was coming right toward us but within 30 seconds we figured out it was just crossing the road ahead, basically moving from our right to left.

"Once we figured that out it was just fun and games."

Ten minutes later they were following an area of circulation that looked promising for another tornado.

"Sure enough, we had another tornado about a hundred yards from us," he said.

A tornado complete with baseball-sized hail, driven sideways with enough force that it destroyed the side of

one MESO vehicle. Those are the moments storm chasers live for.

"He was so into it," Allan said of Chris Howell, a companion in the vehicle. "He just kept saying, 'Oh my God, that's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life.'"

All the while Allan was shooting photos.

"There are a lot of storm chasers who come back with amazing stories and no pictures," he said. "My philosophy is that if you don't have the pictures, you can't tell the story.

"I look at it as hunting, like a safari. The picture is my trophy and that's what I like to have to show people.

"If you're out there watching it, take a damn picture."

Among other things, it gives Allan something to share with his family, something to tell the story graphically of what it's like to be so close to something so powerful, so deafening and so capable of killing and devastation.

But they do draw the line.

"My 4-year-old son is named Noah," Allan said. "I wanted to spell it NOAA but my wife wouldn't go for it."

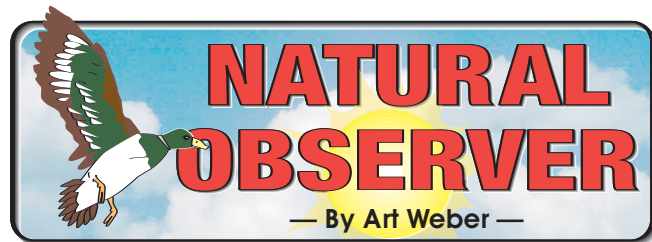
Storm Chaser Exhibit

At Nature Photo Center
Allan Detrich's "Storm Chaser" is the newest exhibit in the gallery at The National Center for Nature Photography at Secor Metropark.

More than 40 images depicting the black beauty of tornadoes, beautifully foreboding cloud formations, lightning and other storm-related images are on display through the month of July.

There is no charge to enter the gallery, which is open Saturdays, Sundays and summer holidays from noon until 5:00 p.m.

Secor Metropark, one of the Metroparks of the Toledo Area, is located on West Central Avenue, six miles west of its interchange with US 23/I-475. For additional information go to www.NaturePhotoCenter.com.



near Oklahoma City where he recorded some amazing images.

His tornado and other storm images have been widely distributed.

"One of my photos from the November 10, 2002 outbreak in Ohio ran as a double truck (a two-page spread) in Life Magazine and a full page photo in Time," Allan said. "It was considered one of Time and Life Magazine's photos of the year."

Look for a couple of his images from a few weeks ago to turn some heads, too. Most people saw the Plainview, Texas, tornadoes on the news. Allan and his group were there; actually they were there a day ahead of time.

"We drove only about 100 miles to get there because we were pretty much in position the day before, and that's a testament to how good our forecasting people are," Allan



Allan Detrich stops in the 13ABC Storm Center for a portrait while on a photo assignment.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLAN DETRICH