

the chasers' war on storms

When it comes to thrill seeking, a few Brisbane lads are way ahead of those pretenders at the ABC.

Jeni Bone and **Emma Portelli** went in pursuit

When lightning strikes, most of us are likely to run and hide, close the curtains and turn up the TV - but a few locals do exactly the opposite and head to open ground. For photographer Marty Pouwelse, standing on an open wharf watching lightning bolts crackle over the water is just the sort of thing he does as a storm chaser, and it makes for vivid recollections: "It had seemed pretty calm where I was. I could see the storm and the lightning was coming horizontally across the water. I started to move down the wharf when I heard this massive crack. I'm pretty sure the lightning hit the wharf, it was the loudest thing I had ever heard."

So, while a storm warning has the rest of us batten down the hatches, chasers like Marty are jumping in their cars in search of some action. But before you conjure images of Helen Hunt in *Twister*, battling tornadoes for the sake of research, the reality is less romantic or reckless. "There's a common misconception we drive into the storm, but that's not the case. We try to stay outside the storm to get better photos. If you're on the right side of the storm you can get amazing pictures not only of the lightning, but also of the structure of the storm cell," Marty said. Nevertheless Marty, who is a member of Brisbane Storm Chasers (BSCH) and the Australian Severe Weather Association (ASWA), has been caught out a few times. "It can be hard sometimes because the wind is faster than you think. Some days it can move at 100kmph and catch you out. We were driving through one out near Warwick and coming through a field when lightning struck a tree about 10 metres from the road. The tree glowed bright orange for about a minute."

Anthony Cornelius, fellow member of BSCH and ASWA and a meteorologist with Weatherwatch, said storm chasing can take

people all over the world, although Australia has its fair share of wild weather. "Few people realise that Australia is in the top five tornado-producing countries in the world. We do quite well. In summer we have extreme activity in South East Queensland and north-eastern NSW, then in winter there are tornadoes in south-western WA, western Tasmania and part of the Victorian coast from the strong cold fronts."

Anthony has had a close call of his own while chasing a storm. "We were travelling between Warwick and Toowoomba through a field when we got caught in a microburst, which is when there's a down burst of air that causes strong winds, when it hit the ground. It kicked up a huge amount of dust, so thick we couldn't see more than five metres in front of us. The next day I picked up the paper and found out 500 metres from where we were someone actually died from a tree falling on their car. It just sent shivers down my spine because that was what we were really worried about."

They have their own reasons for chasing, which Anthony describes as an acquired taste. For Marty it's all about the thrill. "I think it



Photography by Marty Pouwelse Photography www.ozlandscapes.com

comes down to the adrenalin rush. It can involve hours of driving but when you get near one and hear the thunder and the lightning it gets your blood pumping." He has made his thrill seeking a career, selling his photographs from his website.

Meanwhile Anthony, in his role with Weatherwatch, provides forecasts and data for companies needing up-to-the-minute information

about climate and conditions. "We can take forecasts and convert them into layman's terms for the media, movie and ad makers, energy companies, farmers and factories - anybody who needs to know what the weather will be like," he said.

Anthony and his peers also relay information for the Bureau of Meteorology. "Severe storms often start away from populated areas so we can provide them with ground reports about the severity of the storm, whether there are trees down on the highway or maybe five-centimetre hail. They can look at a radar but nothing substitutes for a ground report. They can then issue a more accurate storm warning to the population."

He said this storm season is shaping up to be a lively one. "We're coming into a La Niña phase and during this transition between La Niña and El Niño we tend to get more storm action. We also tend to get a lot of rainfall at the end of an El Niño. Last year's storm season was fairly mild because of the El Niño, where the 2005 to 2006 period was more severe because of the La Niña."

Be storm ready

1. Tidy up loose items and trim overhanging tree branches. Do not attempt to trim trees near powerlines. If you are concerned a tree is too close to powerlines contact Energex.
2. Check roofing tiles or iron sheets to make sure they are secured.
3. Clear your yard of outdoor furniture, garden debris, garden tools and outdoor toys as these can become projectiles in a storm and may damage your house and powerlines.
4. Prepare an emergency kit (and keep it somewhere handy in the home) which includes a

portable radio and torch with fresh batteries; candles and waterproof matches; reasonable stocks of fresh water, canned food, can opener and self-contained cooking gear; First Aid kit and essential medications; emergency contact numbers for local council, SES, Police, Fire and Ambulance.

5. If power is lost during a storm, turn off and unplug electrical items.
6. Do not use wet or damp electrical items.
7. Stay away from fallen powerlines and call Energex on 13 19 62 to report them.

Tips provided by Energex and RACQ

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