

Deadly gales, happy trails

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While a violent tempest can destroy property and bring financial ruin, it's also the key to fortune for an intrepid breed of entrepreneur: the storm chaser. George Kourounis, full-time chaser and former host of the TV series *Angry Planet*, reveals the secrets to survival in his dream job.

COURTESY GEORGE KOUROUNIS

Instead of your math homework, you were busy counting lightning strikes. When your parents pleaded with you to go to law school, you drowned them out with the sound of hurricane-force winds.

Well, storm chasing may just be in your forecast.

As violent weather becomes more common, what may have seemed like a fairy tale now might be a valid career choice.

It worked for George Kourounis, a full-time storm chaser who tracked his first tempest in 1998. After years of dodging cattle, embracing hail and praying for lightning, Kourounis, who makes his living by photographing and filming storms, offers four skills you'll need to thrive — and survive.

Take your veggies, leave the candy

You have to know what you're looking for. Kourounis hunts for supercell storms — thunderstorms known for their rotating updraft.

"It looks like a cauliflower," he says of storms with the potential to produce a good tornado. "If it looks like cotton candy — soft and mushy — then no."

What Kourounis is really searching for is a cap, a layer of warm air that covers cold air in a storm. If it's strong, but not too strong, then the storm will eventually get through the cap. "Then you've got these explosive storms," he said.

Learn to mind the cows

"Some of the most dangerous things don't involve the actual phenomenon," Kourounis said. "Driving on the roads, that is far more dangerous."

Tracking a storm often involves hours of driving, sometimes on unpaved, dangerous paths. Factor in other storm chasers paying more attention to the sky than the road, panicked locals and slick surfaces, and you have a real chance of crashing.

Kourounis has even been caught in a cattle stampede at the worst possible time.

"We had baseball hail coming down, a tornado on the ground moving slowly towards us ... and a herd of cattle that would not get out of my way," he said.

Develop a strong stomach

Storm chasing comes with its fair share of superstitions.

Kourounis firmly believes, for example, that if he accidentally hits a bird, he'll find a storm that day. And when in Texas, if you pass an Allsup's you better stop for a burrito — no matter how unappetizing — or the fates will be against you.

Know when to walk — or run — away

Kourounis's most important rule is simple enough: know when to let the tornado go.

"No photo's worth dying for," he says.

Raining cash?

According to Kourounis, one tornado season can cost a few thousand dollars in gas, food, hotels and travel arrangements. And your competition isn't just other storm chasers, but everyone with a cellphone camera who's willing to give their shots away for free.

- On the flip side, documentaries looking for professional storm footage can pay \$35 per second.

Head in the clouds

If you're looking for the perfect twister, here's his list of the best places to find them:

- Tornado alley: North Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska (May and June).
- Dixie alley: Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee (March and April).
- Northern plains: Dakota, the Canadian Prairies (Summer).
- Southern Ontario: in the corridor from Windsor up to Barrie (May to August).

Gear up and get going

Strobe, emergency lights

These help to illuminate the road — essential at night.



A good laptop

This is key. Kourounis's computer has radar software that he checks regularly.

Radio

This allows Kourounis to communicate with fellow storm chasers and weather stations.



RITA POLIAKOV/METRO

A trusty car

Kourounis' 1999 Honda CRV is covered in hail dents, or "trophies." He's replaced the windshield several times.

GPS

Kourounis has a basic model as well as a more sophisticated GPS that he runs on his computer.

More online

Check out his hunts online at YouTube account gkourounis



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