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Weather
watchers see
Mother Nature's
fury unfold on the
Great Plains



FAR LEFT: Baseball-sized hail accompanied a tornado near Attica, Kan.

LEFT: A tornado drops down from the sky just 25 yards from storm chasers in Attica.

BELOW: A tornado touchdown near Attica is accompanied by a rainbow and hail.



Storm chasing in tornado alley

Photos and story
By **ALLAN DETRICH**
BLADE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

I saw my first tornado at age 11. From that day on, I never looked at the skies the same way again. I was torn, seeing both the beauty and the beast in the churning clouds: the beauty from the awesome show that Mother Nature offers viewers who marvel from a safe distance, and the beast from the unmatched power of the winds that sweep homes into the skies while families huddle in basements.

Every May, the Great Plains — also known as tornado alley — hosts scientists and storm chasers hoping to get a glimpse of Mother Nature's fury.

I have been storm chasing for nine years with a group of friends united by our love for weather. Here is an account of a chase day this year:

We made our way May 12 to an area in Kansas placed under a "slight risk" for severe storms by the Storm Prediction Center of the National Weather Service in Norman, Okla. We drove several hours south toward Dodge City. The temperature was in the mid-80s and the dew point was rising. Tracking a low-pressure center, we noticed a shift in the wind from south to almost due east. This meant the wind was now being sucked into the low, and this is where we wanted to be. We tracked radar, and saw storms start to blow up to the north and east of us. The chase was on.

We could see large cumulus towers on the horizon, moving about 15 miles per hour to the northeast. We were catching up at about 70 mph. The cloud tops were nearing 55,000 feet and the radar indicated rotation and baseball-sized hail.

To our south, another cell popped up and drew the energy from the one we were following. The newly formed cell's cloud tops soared to 60,000 feet in just 20 minutes. This was our storm.

We tracked the storm through Medicine Lodge, Kan., and saw our first tornado west of Attica; it rolled silently across farmland and was accompanied by baseball-sized hail. As the tornado faded away, several rope tornadoes whipped through the skies above us. We spotted another monster to the east.

After jumping back in the trucks, we rolled through Attica. A home on the outskirts was demolished. Members of my group are trained in search and rescue. Local authorities had their hands full, and had our group search through the destroyed home and surrounding area for injured people. Luckily, everyone from the home was safe.

After 14 hours, baseball-sized hail, tornadoes, and funnel clouds, we called it a day. We found a motel and got ready to head out for the next day's show.

Allan Detrich has had more than a dozen photos shown on the Weather Channel's "Storm Stories" series. His photo of a tornado moving through Tiffin, Ohio, was chosen as Time magazine's photo of the year. For more photos and stories, see his Web site, www.allandetrich.com.

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FAR LEFT: Austin, Texas, firefighter Randy Denzer flees a tornado touchdown near Attica, Kan., where search-and-rescue operations were taking place.

LEFT: Mourners look at memorials in Utica, Ill., where eight people were killed in May by a tornado.



A home on the outskirts of Attica, Kan., lies in ruins — destroyed by a tornado — as more storms move in during search and rescue operations.