

Spotter Safety: Your Number One Priority

Accurate and timely spotter reports are critical to your local community and to the National Weather Service. However, your first priority as a storm spotter is to **STAY SAFE!** Severe storms present a number of hazards, any of which could lead to injury or death if you're not extremely careful.

Depending on whether you are spotting from your vehicle or from a fixed location (like a home or business), there are hazards you need to be aware of and plan for when you're observing storms.

Mobile Spotter Safety Concerns

Mobile spotters are those who observe storms from their vehicle or from a position other than their home or business. In many communities, spotters have assigned observation locations – when spotters are activated, they go to their designated spot, and observe and report weather conditions. Some mobile spotters stay mobile during the storm and attempt to move along with the storm to maintain a view of the “action area” and report any changes as the storm progresses.

NOTE: The National Weather Service **does not condone, endorse or recommend storm chasing.** It is a dangerous practice and should not be attempted.

As a mobile spotter, there are important safety considerations you should think about. The following is a partial list of the hazards you may face as a mobile spotter:

Being on the Road

Even on a sunny day with no storms, driving a vehicle on a public roadway can be dangerous. When you add storms – with heavy rain, gusty winds, hail, blowing dust, etc – the danger increases dramatically. To stay safe as a mobile spotter, keep these things in mind:

Always spot with a partner – This allows the driver to focus on the road while the passenger watches the sky. This also provides an extra set of eyes to keep an eye on rapidly changing situations.

Watch for water on the road – Hydroplaning is a serious threat for drivers, and it doesn't take much rain to cause roads to become slick and hazardous.

Obey traffic laws – Speeding, parking too close to the edge of the road and making sudden turns and stops on unfamiliar roads all spell trouble.

Watch out for the “other guy” – Severe storms in the Plains often draw a crowd of onlookers, from casual observers to organized groups of storm chasers. Be extra careful when stopping to view a storm, making sure to pull completely off roadways and keeping an eye out for traffic, even in places where you would never expect to see traffic.

Make sure your vehicle is ready for action – A well-maintained vehicle with a **full tank of gas** is crucial for a mobile spotter's safety and success.

Lightning

All thunderstorms produce lightning, and people are killed and injured each year by lightning. Storm spotters may put themselves at risk from lightning by being in the open, being on a hill or high spot (for better visibility), parking or standing next to metal fences or underneath power lines, standing close to camera tripods or using radio equipment attached to antennae.

Remember that lightning typically provides no warning – the first strike that you see may be the last. Follow these basic lightning safety guidelines:

Avoid being the tallest object. and stay away from other tall objects (like trees, power pole/lines)

Don't stand close to fences or power poles/lines. Even though you may not be in an area of frequent lightning, lightning can travel a considerable distance along these pathways.

As mentioned before, you should not wait for some type of warning (hair standing on end, sounds on AM or other radio equipment, etc) before taking shelter from lightning – the first strike from a storm could be the one that gets you. Treat lightning with respect and stay in a protected area when lightning is in the area.

CPR training is an excellent idea for all mobile storm spotters. Remember that a person struck by lightning carries no residual charge and CPR could save a life.

The Storm

If a mobile storm spotter is well trained, experienced and knowledgeable about severe storm structure and behavior, they can usually avoid becoming a victim of the storm itself. However, the environment in and near a severe storm can change dramatically in a short period of time, and these changes can catch you by surprise. These basic tips can help you stay safe:

Avoid the most intense areas of storms – This seems obvious, but each year spotters, for one reason or another, make decisions that place them in the core of a dangerous storm. Storm chasers call this “core-punching” and it’s a very dangerous practice for a number of reasons. First, you may drive into very large hail, which can damage your vehicle and injure you. Second, you could drive right into the path of a tornado with very little time to react. And finally, the core of the storm is a dangerous place with low visibilities, heavy rain, and violent winds.

Keep your head on a swivel – When observing a storm, it is easy to lose focus and become fixated on some feature you’re watching. You should maintain awareness of what’s going on all around you and always be mindful of a surprise event. This points out the importance of spotting with a partner, who can be an extra set of eyes and ears to help you stay safe.

ALWAYS have an escape route in mind – Mobile spotters should always plan an emergency escape route that will take them out of harm’s way should the storm change direction or otherwise threaten them. Determining that escape route requires a great deal of knowledge about the storm’s movement and behavior. A detailed set of current maps of your spotting area is a critical part of a mobile spotter’s toolbox, but be mindful of the fact that roads sometimes change before maps do, and they may not reflect reality in every case.

Never drive into areas where water covers the road – This is especially true when you cannot be certain how deep the water is. Many people die each year by driving into flooded areas and drowning in their vehicles. Find another safer route.

Keep your engine running – Especially when operating close to a severe storm. You do not want to find out about a vehicle problem as a violent storm bears down on you.

Be extra cautious at night – Obviously, it is more dangerous to deal with something you cannot clearly see. Storms at night present special problems for spotters and you should be extremely cautious when observing storms after dark.

Fixed Spotter Safety Concerns

When it comes to being safe, storm spotters who observe storms from a fixed location have some advantages, but also some disadvantages as compared to mobile spotters. Fixed spotters may have access to shelter and will not be exposed to the elements and all the hazards that mobile spotters face. However, there are instances when mobile spotters might be able to get out of the path of a dangerous storm, while fixed spotters cannot.

Fixed spotters should be mindful of all the hazards a severe storm can bring, including lightning, large damaging hail, violent straight-line winds, torrential rains and tornadoes. And just like everyone, fixed spotters should have a severe weather safety plan for wherever they may be. Remember these basic safety guidelines:

Tornado safety – Get underground or into a safe room or basement if possible. If none of these are available, get on the lowest floor of a sturdy building, putting as many walls between you and the outside as possible. Avoid windows, doors and outside walls. Cover your head and body to protect yourself from deadly flying debris. Mobile homes and vehicles should be abandoned for more substantial shelter.

Lightning safety – Stay away from doors and windows. Avoid using electrical appliances and stay away from plumbing fixtures, as these can be pathways for lightning to enter a building. Stay off the telephone, especially corded phones, as much as possible.

Hail and wind safety – Severe thunderstorms can produce destructive hail and damaging winds, even without a tornado. Follow the tornado safety rules, especially when a storm contains very large hail and/or violent winds.

From the Norman Oklahoma NWS Office web site: <http://www.srh.noaa.gov/oun/?n=stormspotting-safety>