

by Megan E. Petty

# Storm Chaser Mike Theiss



**M**ike Theiss is a storm chaser and the owner of [www.ultimatechase.com](http://www.ultimatechase.com). Theiss' fascination with the weather began at a young age, and he translated this passion into a successful photography and digital imaging business that boasts a client roster that includes National Geographic, Discovery Channel, and The Weather Channel. The take-home message from viewing Theiss' footage? That his job requires nerves of steel.

## What first made you want to become a storm chaser?

There was not a single event that made me want to become a storm chaser, but I think the combination of growing up in the Florida Keys and witnessing waterspouts, hurricanes, and intense lightning storms started my interest in storms and my desire to learn more. I think the deal was sealed at age 12 when Category 5 Hurricane Andrew (1992) flipped my entire community in South Florida upside down. It was at this moment that I knew I had to start documenting hurricanes as they happened, to help educate society

about the dangers that storms possess and hopefully save lives.

## What types of supplies do you bring with you on a chase?

What I bring on a chase differs depending on what I am chasing. Typically tornado chasing is a lot easier and requires fewer supplies, because a tornado outbreak is usually a smaller-scale disaster than a hurricane, so food, shelter, and supplies are always in reach. When chasing a hurricane, which requires that I bring enough supplies to be self-sufficient for at least

two weeks. My supplies consist of enough food and water for 14 days, a GlobalStar Satellite Phone, flashlights, batteries, dry towels, a laptop with mobile Internet access, ropes, a GPS device, boots, rain gear, a flotation device, tools, and lots of camera equipment.

## What's the most dangerous or intense weather situation that you've been in?

I have been in several intense weather situations chasing both tornadoes and hurricanes, but at the top of the list would have to be Hurricane Katrina. I was in Gulfport, Mississippi, right on the beach in a concrete hotel during landfall. The water came up 28 feet at my location, and the entire bottom floor of the building was under rough seas. At the time I was not worried because I had studied the building the day before and was confident the break-away walls on the first floor would work and the pressure would be relieved so it would not collapse. What I learned after the storm was that heavy steel shipping containers from a nearby port that were picked up in the storm surge destroyed all of the buildings, even the concrete ones, along the stretch of coastline near the port. I was located only half a mile from those shipping containers.

## Who buys your photos and videos? Do you work with government agencies like NOAA or NASA?

All video I shoot is licensed through my company, Ultimate Chase Inc., which was established in 2001. Ultimate Chase licenses video for documentaries, television commercials, breaking news, public awareness programs, concerts, music videos, and more. Our material has been

used by National Geographic, Discovery Channel, NBC, CNN, PBS, ABC, The Weather Channel, and many others. Our goal is to show the general public the dangers that come with hurricanes and other storms and to teach a sense of awareness of severe weather. I think if people can see what a hurricane looks like it will help to convince them to take their preparations and evacuations more seriously the next time they are threatened. I work with the National Hurricane Center in Miami and with the local emergency management offices to produce videos that help to raise hurricane awareness. This hurricane season I was invited to ride along and document a WP-3D NOAA Hurricane Hunters mission into the eye of a hurricane via aircraft.

#### **Do you work alone or with a team?**

I chase both alone and with others. It depends on the situation, but typically I chase hurricanes alone and tornadoes with a team. I occasionally team up with others for the more rare and dangerous storms, like I did during Katrina.

#### **Location-wise, where do you have the best luck chasing storms?**

I have had my best luck chasing tornadoes in the Texas Panhandle and in Kansas. I have seen dozens of tornadoes in Texas and Kansas but strangely have yet to see a single tornado in Oklahoma. As far as hurricanes, my best luck is probably in Florida. I have taken pictures of the landfall of 16 hurricanes/tropical storms in the state of Florida beginning in 1987, when I was 9.

#### **What do you think of the new Enhanced Fujita scale?**

I have mixed feelings about the Enhanced Fujita scale. To me, the Fujita scale worked just fine, and the only purpose of a "scale" is to use it for reference in categorizing a particular tornado. I think the general public had a good understanding of the original scale, and changing it up causes



MIKE THEISS

This abandoned truck stands in sharp contrast to the raging winds and storm surge from Hurricane Dennis, which made landfall in Key West, Florida, in July 2005.

confusion. I believe in picking a scale and keeping it!

#### **What advice would you give to aspiring chasers?**

The most important thing to do is to educate yourself about weather and how the atmosphere works. You first need to chase with an experienced person to learn the ropes. In storm chasing you don't get a second chance. If you are not familiar with the behaviors of a tornado or hurricane you can get killed. This is not a practical profession by any means, so don't look at storm chasing as a career. It takes a really rare person to be able to take the ups and downs of chasing and the thousands of miles on the road a month. All my storm chasing journeys are fueled by a burn-

ing passion for weather. If you have this burning passion and want to know the next step, I would recommend going on a tornado chasing tour. On a tour you ride with educated meteorologists and experienced chasers who can safely show you storms and tornadoes and teach you about storm chasing. I got my start chasing tornadoes in Tornado Alley by joining Cloud 9 Tours and learning the ropes from experienced chasers Jim Leonard and Charles Edwards. I would highly recommend that anyone who wants to join a tour visit [www.Cloud9Tours.com](http://www.Cloud9Tours.com). **W**

*MEGAN E. PETTY is the editorial assistant for Weatherwise. Do you have a great idea for On the Job? Email your suggestions to us at [ww@heldref.org](mailto:ww@heldref.org).*