

Eye of the

Storm

Chasing Storms with
Warren Faidley

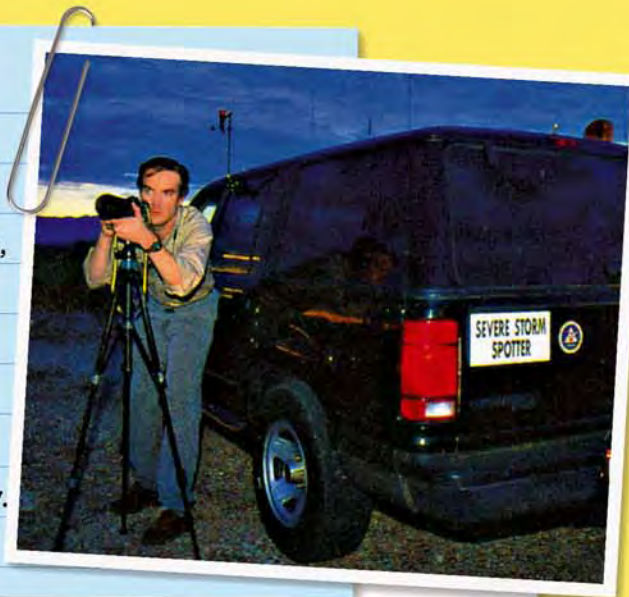
by Stephen Kramer
photographs by Warren Faidley

Genre

Expository nonfiction gives information about real people and events. Be prepared for a few surprises as you read about a real person, Warren Faidley, who experiences a real storm, Hurricane Andrew.

Is the middle of a hurricane any
place for a photographer?

Warren Faidley is a storm chaser. Beginning in April and continuing through November, he can be found on the trail of tornadoes, thunderstorms, and hurricanes, photographing their spectacular beauty and power. When he is not out chasing storms, Warren is at home in Tucson, Arizona, where he sells his photographs through his business, a stock photo agency.



Storm Seasons and Chasing

Storms are caused by certain kinds of weather patterns. The same patterns are found in the same areas year after year. For example, every spring, large areas of cool, dry air and warm, moist air collide over the central United States. If the winds are right, tornado-producing thunderstorms appear. That's why tornadoes in the south central United States are most likely to happen in spring. During July and August, shifting winds push moisture from the south up into the Arizona desert. When the cool, moist air is heated by the hot desert, storm clouds form. That's why Tucson has summer thunderstorms. In the late summer and early fall, when oceans in the northern Atlantic are warmest, tropical storms form off the west coast of Africa. A few of these turn into the hurricanes that sometimes batter the east and gulf coasts of North America.

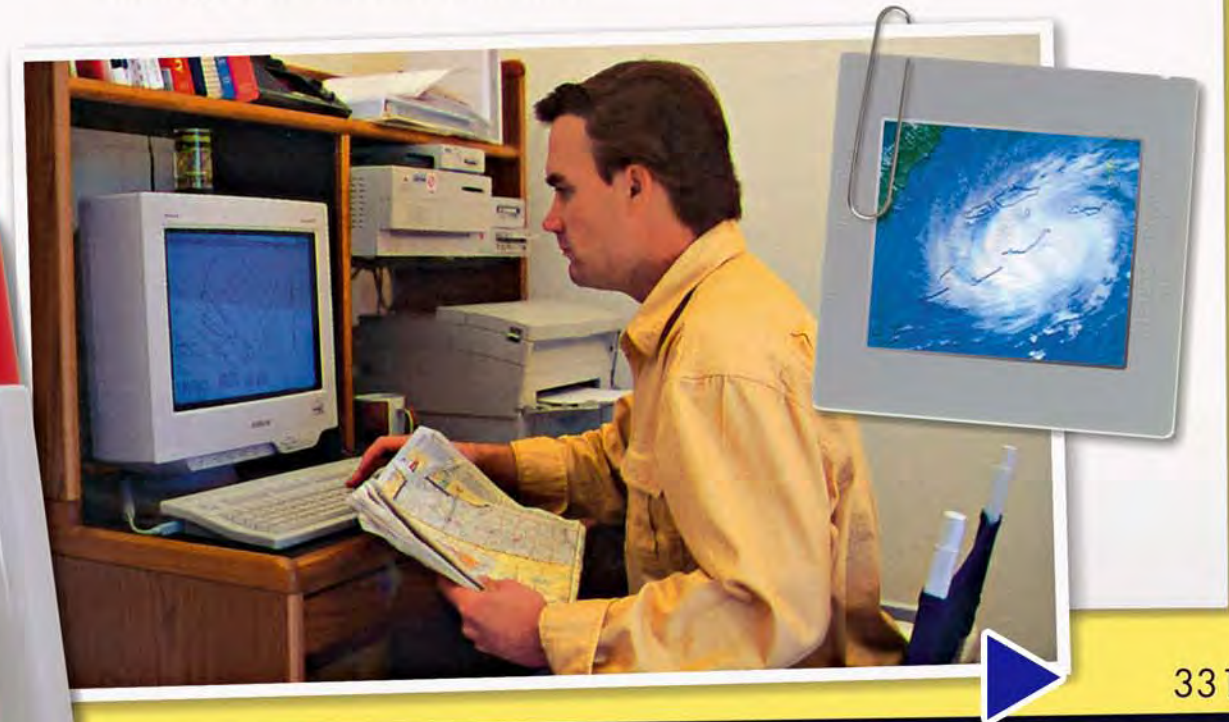


Because Warren is a storm chaser, his life also follows these weather patterns. Each spring, Warren goes on the road, traveling through parts of the United States likely to be hit by tornadoes. During the summer, he stays near Tucson so he can photograph the thunderstorms that develop over the desert. In the late summer and fall, he keeps an eye on weather activity in the Atlantic Ocean, ready to fly to the east coast if a hurricane appears.

Chasing Hurricanes

By the first or second week in September, Tucson's summer thunderstorms are ending. There won't be much lightning until the next summer. But that works out well for Warren, because August through November are months when hurricanes sometimes strike the east and gulf coasts of the United States.

Although Tucson is far from the areas where hurricanes hit, Warren begins his hurricane chases from home. He uses his computer to get information on tropical storms or hurricanes moving toward North America.



“I can’t go out and look for a hurricane, or watch one develop, like I can with tornadoes and lightning,” says Warren. “When a hurricane is forming, I look at satellite pictures, I listen to weather forecasters talk about it, and I pay attention to what scientists and meteorologists think the hurricane is going to do. Hurricane paths are very hard to predict. Often a hurricane will roar right up to the coast and then stop and go away. So I want to be sure that I’m going to have a storm to photograph before I travel all the way to the east coast!”

When weather forecasters predict that a hurricane will strike the eastern United States, Warren flies to a city near the place the storm is expected to arrive. Flying is faster than driving Shadow Chaser* all the way from Tucson. Besides, a vehicle would not be safe during a hurricane. Branches, boards, and other loose materials carried by hurricane winds quickly shatter windows and damage any cars left outside.



*Shadow Chaser is Warren’s specially equipped four-wheel-drive vehicle.



“Hurricanes are the only type of storm where I’m shooting destruction in progress. With tornadoes, you’re not usually close enough to shoot the destruction—if you are, you’re in a very dangerous place! With hurricanes I’m shooting palm trees bending until they’re ready to break and floodwaters splashing over the bank. Those kinds of shots really separate hurricane photos from the others. Most of my hurricane photos are wind shots with heavy rains.

“Finding a place to stay safe while I take hurricane photos is also a challenge. I like to find a solid garage. A good concrete garage is going to be able to withstand the high winds. Another danger with hurricanes is that the powerful winds can lift the seawater and carry it a long ways inland. This is called a storm surge, and it’s like a flood from the ocean. When you’re picking a spot to stay during the hurricane, you need to have some idea of how high the storm surge might be and how far inland it will go.”

Hurricane Andrew

On Saturday, August 22, 1992, after a seven-hour flight from Tucson, Warren arrived in Miami, Florida. He had arranged to meet Mike Laca and Steve Wachholder, two other experienced hurricane chasers. Hurricane Andrew was expected to hit the Florida coast in two days, so Mike, Steve, and Warren had agreed to work together to predict where the storm was going to hit, scout out a safe place to stay, and photograph the storm.

When Warren arrived, the three compared notes. They knew, from weather reports and bulletins from the National Hurricane Center, that Andrew had the potential to become a very dangerous storm. The hurricane was about 520 miles from Miami. It was heading in their direction at about 14 miles per hour. The storm had sustained wind speeds of 110 miles per hour, and they were expected to increase. Warren, Mike, and Steve agreed to get a good night's sleep and meet at noon the next day to go over the latest forecasts. When they had a better idea of where the storm would hit, they could start looking for a safe place to stay.

Mike and Warren found a sturdy, seven-story parking garage in an area called Coconut Grove. It was built with thick concrete walls and looked like a fortress, but the outside walls also had large square openings that could be used for taking pictures. Fort Andrew, as Warren began calling the building, was located on a slight hill, which would help protect it from the storm surge.



Warren, Mike, and Steve find shelter in a seven-story parking garage.



Steve, Mike, and Warren set up a “command center” on the fifth floor of the garage. They stockpiled food, water, rope, and waterproof bags as well as their photography equipment. The three took turns monitoring the latest updates on TV and radios.

As the sun set, Warren and his friends waited anxiously. By 11:00 P.M., there was still no sign of the storm. They began to wonder whether the hurricane had changed direction. But reports on the TV and radio kept saying that Andrew was still headed straight for land—and its strongest winds were expected to hit the area where Warren, Steve, and Mike were staying.

About 2:30 A.M., Hurricane Andrew finally arrived. Warren was watching when bright flashes began appearing in the northeast. The lights looked like fireworks. Actually, they were sparks and explosions as the approaching winds knocked down power lines and transformers. Warren will never forget the sounds of that night:

“At first, there was just the noise of sparking electrical lines and trash cans rolling down the street. But as time passed, the wind just kept getting louder and louder and scarier and scarier.”



During the next hour, Steve and Warren tried several times to measure the wind speeds with an instrument called an anemometer. Steve held the instrument out an opening in the wall and Warren used his flashlight to read the dial. When the wind reached 65 miles per hour they gave up.

“I can’t hold on anymore,” Steve called above the howling winds. “It’s too dangerous! I can’t hold on!” The winds were carrying raindrops sideways through the air.

“Around 3:45 A.M., we began to hear bursts of breaking glass, as the winds became strong enough to blow in windows. Sometimes the crack of breaking glass was followed by a tinkling sound, like wind chimes, as the wind blew the broken glass along the streets. Inside the garage, car alarm sirens wailed as cars were hit by blasts of wind. Later, even the sound of alarms and the crack of breaking glass disappeared in the roar of the hurricane winds.”



As the wind wailed in the darkness, Warren wondered how he was ever going to get any pictures. He worried that by the time it became light, the hurricane winds would die down. He worried about missing the chance to see what was going on outside.

About 5:15 A.M., the hurricane winds reached their peak. The parking garage began to shake. Wind slammed into the concrete walls with the force of bombs. Large sprinkler pipes fastened to the ceilings in the garage began to work their way loose. Several pipes collapsed and fell to the floor.

Now the winds were blowing so hard inside the garage that it was impossible to walk even a few feet in areas that weren’t blocked by walls. The roar of the wind turned into a sound like the constant blast of jet engines.





Finally, around 6:00 A.M., with the winds still howling, Warren saw the first faint light of the new day. As the sky gradually turned a strange blue color, Steve, Mike, and Warren looked out on a scene of terrible destruction. Broken boats, and parts of boats, had been carried by the storm surge from the marina almost to the garage. A tree that had been torn from the ground during the night had smashed into the side of a parked truck. Although most of the buildings around the garage were still standing, many had been heavily damaged.

When there was finally enough light for his camera, Warren headed outside. Leaning into the strong winds, he carefully made his way toward the marina. At times, gusts of wind knocked him to the ground. Wreckage from boats and buildings was still flying through the air. Warren took pictures of the wind bending the trees near the marina and the broken boats on the shore.



Warren continued walking along the beach, shooting more pictures as the sky turned light. After about an hour, the wind began to quiet and the rain became more gentle. Now Warren began to wade carefully toward the marina, taking more pictures of the wreckage ahead of him. Other people were arriving to look at the damage and to see if their boats had survived.

After a tour of the marina, Warren went back to the beach. It was littered with boat parts, clothing, and dead fish. There was even a photo album opened to a wet page. More and more people arrived to see what remained of their homes or boats.

Warren finally returned to his motel, where he slept for ten hours. The next day, when he drove back to the Miami airport, his camera bags were filled with rolls of exposed film. His arm ached where the wind had slammed him into a railing after he left the parking garage. Still, as the airplane took off from Miami, it was hard for Warren to imagine that two nights earlier he had been watching, listening to, and photographing the destructive winds of Hurricane Andrew.

