

Posted: June 1997

Sky Spies - Volunteers track storms for NWS

Volunteer storm watchers make the weatherman's job easier

By: Steven Doman

Leaving a dry, warm house in search of howling winds and pouring rain is Scott Cole's and Randy Kozloski's idea of a good time.

Cole and Kozloski, both of Ashwaubenon, track severe weather as volunteers for the National Weather Service. For these weather hounds, it means as most people dash for shelter, they mobilize and head out into the elements.

"It's fun and exciting, and also personally rewarding," Cole said.

For both men, this bizarre and often dangerous choice for community service began with an interest in operating amateur radios. They now volunteer for Skywarn, an organization working with the National Weather Service (NWS) to give close up reports of severe weather.

Covering 23 counties in Wisconsin, Skywarn helps NWS to keep a close eye on threatening weather by sending volunteers directly into the storm, helping the NWS track its severity and direction.

To use the Skywarn system, the NWS calls with a severe weather report and asks for updates of the storm's progression. Skywarn then organizes its members in the particular area, sometimes with less than 10 minutes notice before the storm hits.

Although the NWS has the advanced weather technology, a person at the eye of the storm, is often able to give a more accurate picture than a screen of colors.

Skywarn members have radio equipment in their cars to relay information, about the storm immediately.

They enjoy working with the advanced equipment needed for the job. "You get to play with high tech stuff," said Cole.

Some also carry cameras and camcorders to film any major storm happenings.

Stormchasers are trained to look for clues to tell them what type of weather will develop, Cole said. And also sometimes most importantly, they are trained to always have a method readily available to avert Mother Nature's most wicked situations, he said.

Dangerous situations present themselves most often at evening, Cole said. Because of the night sky, it becomes difficult to see the clouds and read their clues. It is then weather spotters most frequently get caught in severe weather, he said.

Skywarn volunteers are called to report on severe weather about 12 times a year, Cole said. Although, two years ago, there about 25 calls.

And as with so many other things in spring and summer, it depends on the weather.