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Enter the twister: Tornado Alley in IMAX

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Film

Phil McKenna, correspondent



Four green-hued mini-tornadoes mesmerise the audience as they dance across a pancake-flat landscape. Then, the fleeting dancers morph into something more sinister - a single, ferocious, and rapidly approaching mega-twister that threatens to engulf the IMAX screen.

So unfolds *Tornado Alley*, an action-adventure movie chasing the largest severe weather research programme ever undertaken: VORTEX2, an ambitious year-long investigation of tornado genesis.

By better understanding why some "supercell" storms - thunderstorms characterised by their constantly spiraling updraft - become tornados and others don't, VORTEX2 researchers hope to develop better tools for predicting when and where the devastating storms will strike. By bringing audiences along for the ride in IMAX, director Sean Casey captures both the terrifying power of these storms and the dedication of those who study them.

Narrated by Bill Paxton, star of the 1996 storm-chaser movie *Twister*, *Tornado Alley* tracks the research group as they stake out the infamous pathway leading from the warm, moist waters of the Gulf of Mexico to the heart of the US Midwest. From 2009 to 2010 the 150-member team

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hunkered down in the region that earned its moniker for being home to 80 per cent of the world's tornadoes.

The 43-minute movie follows that intrepid group as they use a high-tech armada of vehicles packed with radar, wind gauges and temperature sensors that can be deployed at a moment's notice. (Viewers of the IMAX film quickly pick up a tip that could come in handy in tornado country: if you ever see these vehicles speeding in your direction, go the other way, fast!)

And, if watching researchers hunting for the origins of some of the world's most destructive storms isn't enough to get viewers' heart rates up, Casey adds an additional challenge: driving a 6-tonne armoured vehicle into the eye of the storm for the first ever video footage captured from inside a twister.

Tornado Alley delivers both awe-inspiring tornado footage and real-time computer imaging of the storms as they unfold. It is in connecting the two, however, that the film comes up short in one very important respect - explaining exactly what is at stake that prompted VORTEX2 researchers to spend so much time, effort and money to find better ways to predict storms.

Karen Kosiba, an atmospheric scientist at the [Center for Severe Weather Research](#) in Boulder, Colorado, one of the researchers profiled onscreen, filled in this gap in a question-and-answer session after a recent screening at Boston's [Museum of Science](#).

Currently, residents of Tornado Alley have on average only 13 minutes' warning before a tornado strikes - and 70 per cent of all tornado warnings are false alarms, Kosiba said. Understanding how tornadoes evolve and learning how to predict them better isn't merely about expanding scientific knowledge, and the US National Science Foundation isn't pouring millions of dollars into tornado research just to make great IMAX movies. Their ultimate goal is to double warning times and slash false alarms. That's quite a compelling reason to chase after storms and it's unfortunate that this otherwise captivating film didn't make that point.

Read more: "Inside the biggest tornado hunt in history"



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