

Inside Stories: The Perfect Storms Transcript

Scott Simmie: Here that? Time to stay inside. Right? I mean, who'd want to go outside in the midst of a really bad storm? Not many people. Right? Well, today's guest, he's one of those people. In fact, it's his job. Joining me today is Mark Robinson. Mark works with the Weather Network, and I really hope you don't mind me calling you this Mark, but Mark is a weather geek. Welcome, Mark.

Mark Robinson: Yeah, that's a good way of putting it. So, yes, yes, that's totally fine.

Scott Simmie: Listen, tell me about your job. What do you do for a living?

Mark Robinson: Well, actually, it's kind of interesting. I'm actually an accredited meteorologist, so I actually went to school for meteorology. And now, I basically go and get myself into really stupid situations all over the world to basically show that to the people, anybody who wants to see it. And it's gone from just talking about the weather to jumping into volcanoes, hiking up Mount Everest, all kinds of different stuff. It's been a wild ride.

Scott Simmie: When did the fascination with... I mean, it's not just whether, by the sounds of it, but these extreme activities and extreme weather come about for you?

Mark Robinson: Wow. You know what? As a kid, I was terrified of thunderstorms, like hide under your bed and cry kind of terrified of thunderstorms. And as I got older, I started to not be quite as scared of it. And then, one day I just happened to be at the zoo, and my dad, we saw this thunderstorm coming, so we made a run for one of the pavilions that's partly underground. And my dad opened up a back door in the pavilion, which you're not supposed to do, but that's okay, and we basically watched this whole storm go by and I began to get really, really fascinated by it. I'd always been fascinated by people like Jacques Cousteau and volcanologists, so that sort of thing had always been there, but that event really got me more and more interested in thunderstorms.

Scott Simmie: Are there specific types of weather that interest you more than others?

Mark Robinson: It's all interesting. Like for instance, today, we just had a bit of a water spout outbreak on the Great Lakes, and that's absolutely fascinating. We had just some big clouds going up, and I had to stop the car and observe those for a while. So, I think the one that interests me the most would probably be thunderstorms and hurricanes, because those are the real extremes of nature that we could find on the planet. I mean, the hurricanes are massive, massive storms, and they're an expression of the movement of energy around our planet. So, there's no more raw event that you can find that describe how our planet works.

Scott Simmie: Now, I'm guessing that the vast majority of people listening today have never gone and chased a storm. Some of them will really appreciate extreme weather, some people might be frightened of it, but very few will actually have gone and chased a storm. So, how do you, in a very nuts and bolts way, how do you actually go and chase a storm?

Mark Robinson: We usually know that, like if we're talking about thunderstorms - we'll just use thunderstorms as the chasing one because that's where a lot of things start - we'll usually know about three days ahead of time. And keep in mind, this is only in the spring, summer, and sometimes into the fall because that's when we've got the heat and moisture available to actually create thunderstorms. So, we'll usually know about three days ahead of time that we've got something coming, there's potential for a storm, and we'll start to watch that and then begin to narrow in where those storms are going to be. And as we get closer to the day of, we'll be able to narrow that down to a fairly small area. And when I say a fairly small area, I mean, you can find maybe a town in about 100 square miles, and that

whole area around there may set off thunderstorms. But there's been quite often times where you're sitting in a town and you suddenly need to drive an hour, an hour and a half, to get to the new area where these storms may go off.

Mark Robinson: So, there's a lot of just sitting in gas stations or sitting in hotels or sitting at home waiting and watching the observations, waiting and watching for things to change or things to begin to happen, but once things begin to happen, it usually happens in the late afternoon, it can get really hairy really, really quickly. So, one of the things that we're watching for when we know we've picked an area, picked a target area, and we know that, "Okay, storms are probably going to go up in that area," we usually sit in an area and watch satellite and radar. And what's really cool is nowadays all those observations can be found on your phone. That has changed chasing in such a big way. I used to have 11 antennas on my car, all this extra gear to pull in as much information as I possibly could, and now, I'm down to one ham radio antenna and one extra antenna for my phone and that's it, because all that information can be gathered in there.

Mark Robinson: So, you're starting to watch the radar, you start to watch the satellite, and you'll see a little blip show up on radar, and it might be close to you, it might be far away. And what you're watching for is that blip to get bigger and bigger. And on most radars, the lightest rain is blue, little heavier is green, then yellow, then orange, then red, and finally purple. And when you're up to the reds, and you'll usually start to see lightning, at that point you know you've got something that you can go after. And at that point, you're trying to get underneath that storm and get to the business end of the storm.

Mark Robinson: These thunderstorms are extremely organized, so you can actually pick out, usually pick out, exactly where the tornado is going to be or where the heaviest hail is going to be, the heaviest rain, the most lightening. It's really fascinating. So, it takes a lot of learning and then a lot of sitting around waiting, and then a lot of driving. And then there's the yelling and screaming as you see the tornado begin to form. And to be quite honest, for all chasers, we want to see these tornadoes out over empty fields, they're not doing anything to anybody, they're not hurting anybody, but there is that, of course, that very ugly side of the weather, which is when the tornadoes pass through human habitations. And that one is always, always hard to see.

Scott Simmie: I know recently there was, actually, a fairly terrible incident in Canada, in the province of Manitoba, I believe two young people, both 18, were killed in their vehicle. How do you ensure that you're safe or that the people you're chasing with are safe? What do you look for? How do you know when to back off?

Mark Robinson: Wow. You know what? It's all about the margins. It's all about giving yourself a safety margin. Knowing the road network, knowing that you've got an area to go to or just stop before the storm arrives where you are, or pull up behind the storm, and having those safety margins and those escape valves or escape routes are absolutely critical. If you're not sure of your safety, if you're not sure you can get in there safely and get out, you know what? You don't do it.

Mark Robinson: And I know that even saying that, very sadly in 2013, we lost Tim Samaras, who was a storm chaser that had been doing this for 30 years, he'd been doing research. He turned into a scientist. So, he wasn't doing this just for fun, he was doing this as a very serious thing. And we were all in and around a town called El Reno in Oklahoma, and this was the world's widest, the biggest tornado ever recorded. It was 2.6 miles across. There was wind speeds, and they recorded, well over 300 miles an hour. I believe it was 475 kilometers an hour for that one. And Tim got caught. We went South, he went East, and he got caught himself. His chase partner and his son were all unfortunately killed when their car was hit by a part of the tornado and literally picked up and thrown into a field. So, even though you put these safety margins in, you make sure that you're doing the best you can, you can end up still in a situation that you can't escape from.

Mark Robinson: I mean, I never want that to happen to anybody, so I give the dangerous part of the storm as much a birth as I can, as much as a wide margin as I can. But often, if I'm trying to get information back to the Weather Network about what's going on with the storm so that we can get that out to our public, you've got to get in a little bit closer, especially with Southern Ontario storms because they are extra wet so there's a lot of extra rain in and around them, so, sometimes seeing the tornado is very difficult.

Scott Simmie: Many years ago, I went down to Florida to Vero Beach to cover an incoming hurricane. I can't remember what the name of that hurricane was, but it was fairly substantial. And I remember as the first feeder bands started coming in, and they were quite powerful, I thought, "This could be quite a large event," and me being a puny human being, I might not have much control here. And it was truly a moment of realization for me that I thought, "Oh my God, Mother Nature is really powerful when she gets going, and this could become very dangerous very quickly." And so, I quickly relocated and found a safe place with the Emergency Measures Department to stay. And I guess this background is just to ask you, for people who are not experienced chasers like you, or these people who decide, "You know what? I'm going to hang on at the homestead as the tornado comes my way. Ain't no wind forcing me out," whether these people just have the same kind of impression that I might've had where they just think, "Oh, how bad could it be? It'll be all right."

Mark Robinson: Yeah. I mean, that's always a thing. I've been through 23 hurricanes now, and it's the same sort of thing, "Oh, it's going to be fine. Oh, it'll be okay." Not everybody's like that. I think there's a very small number of people that are like, "Oh, I've been through this before, and I can handle it." That one was, when I was in Hurricane Katrina, we were right beside the Hancock Bank building, and I remember going into the bank, it's a commercial bank, and there was a bunch of people that were looking after the computer servers. And so, they were like, "Oh, we've been through this before. It'll be fine. It'll be fine." So, I was chatting with them, I said, "Hey, look, if it gets bad, go into the stairwell. That's where you're going to want to be. You'll be safe in there. The building probably won't come down. And if the windows go out, the flying debris, you should be okay."

Mark Robinson: Well, about a quarter of the way through, we're standing on the backside of the building watching the windows on the backside blowout and computer desks and computer monitors, and whole server equipment came flying out these windows. And we knew that people were in there. Well, I got a chance to talk to them afterwards, and they said, "Thank God we talked to you because we had no idea that it was going to be like this." She said, the one woman I was talking to said, "The windows blew in. We just remembered that you had said go into the stairwell. And we were in the cafeteria, we lost our sleeping bags, our food, everything went flying, but we managed to be okay because we managed to get to the stairwell." And from then on, I'm pretty sure they evacuated at any hurricane.

Mark Robinson: So, these are the kinds of things you just don't want to fool around with, unless you've had a lot of experience, and even then, it is dangerous. I distinctly remember standing at the bottom of the crater of an active volcano, standing beside the lava lake, and it was a on Ambrym Island in Vanuatu in the South Pacific. And I'm standing there beside my chase partner and expedition leader, George Karunas, and thinking, "If this volcano has an earthquake, I'm dead. There's no getting out of this." It was a really humbling experience.

Scott Simmie: What advice would you have, I'm just thinking here in my own home, we had some various severe weather the other day, where should a person go in their own home if something looks really nasty?

Mark Robinson: Well, you know what? The first thing you want to do is stay away from any large windows. The one thing that kills people and injures people is not how fast the wind is blowing, it's what

the wind is blowing, so the biggest thing is always flying debris. If you've got a big plate glass window, and you get a rock fired at the window, even at 100 kilometers an hour, like 60 miles an hour, that'll smash that window. Now, you've got all those pieces of glass moving at 60 miles an hour towards you. So, you want to stay away from any of the big plate glass windows. If you are seeing a tornado, if you got a tornado warning, the best thing you can do is get into your basement. I've quite literally seen entire buildings, entire houses, just swept right off, like there's nothing left, and yet the person that was in there survived because she was down in the basement. And she was uninjured, completely uninjured.

Mark Robinson: If you don't have a basement, smallest room in the house, which is usually the bathroom, it's usually got a very small window in it. It also has copper piping that goes throughout the walls. So it's just going to be a little bit more safe than, say, a large bedroom or something like that. So, that's your last ditch thing, and then, of course, if you've got an older bathtub that just happens to be steel, you want to be inside that. Just because, again, it all comes down to that flying debris. That's what injures and kills people.

Scott Simmie: When you mentioned Katrina a couple of moments ago, and of course I remember that you were there, and you've been so many places, Tornado Alley many, many times in the United States, is there one all time extreme weather adventure that really stands out for you? And if so, what would that be, and why?

Mark Robinson: Katrina. Katrina is definitely the one that stands out. We were in the worst of the worst of that hurricane. And because it was such a historic event, it's going to be very difficult for anything to top that, because for so long, the United States had this idea that, "Oh, hurricanes are no big deal. We can fool around with them. It's not going to do my job. Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it," because death tolls were like three, and those were usually traffic accidents or a tree falling over. And then Katrina hit, wiped out a city, and killed 1,800 people. That was a wake up call like I haven't seen for the US in a long time, in terms of weather. So, it was the historicness of that storm, plus being in the worst of the worst of that storm and just experiencing the whole thing, it's going to be very hard to top that one.

Scott Simmie: Now, I'm not sure whether it would have been Katrina or somewhere else that you've been to, but you've been to more than one place, too, where there's been a very violent weather event and people have perished. What is that like for you when that's obviously not what you want to go there and see, you're there because of the nature, just the intensity of the event, and you're there to report? But what's it like when it makes that turn that no one wants to see?

Mark Robinson: As I said earlier, it's the ugly side, it's the horrendous side, it's the tough side of it. I think just like anybody, it's horrifying, it's hard. The one I remember most, it was, again, here we go back to 2013 again, was the Moore, Oklahoma tornado. It was an EF5 ripped right through Moore. And myself and Jacqueline Woodall, again, my co-host for the Storm Hunter show, we were in there into about three hours after the tornado, and we had to put aside the fact that we'd just heard that some children had been killed in a school right near where we were. Meanwhile, I have two daughters of that age. I mean, I was thinking, how would I feel for something like that? And we just had to report and let people know what was going on, that these people needed help, that this was what was happening.

Mark Robinson: These events are stupendous to watch, but when they impact people's lives... And it isn't just people losing their lives, it's people losing their homes, it's people losing their businesses. It has such a massive effect on their lives that it's a very, very difficult thing to see and to experience. It's almost like you have to put that aside and try to let people know outside of that of what's going on and what they can do to help. But the interesting side of that is that I've gone back to some of these people, I've gone back to some of these homes, I've gone back to some of these neighborhoods that have been wiped out, and said, "Hey, how are you doing?"

Mark Robinson: And it's always great to see the reaction of people because they say, "Man, the media never comes back and asks us how we're doing." He was like, "It's so nice that the Weather Network has come back to find out how we're doing." And quite often, people have said, "It's been hard, but I'm doing better. Things are getting back on track." And it's always good for those survivors to see that, yeah, they've been impacted by this event, but they're, once again, doing well, or at least getting things back on track. So, I think that's a side that I really like to emphasize and I really like to see.

Scott Simmie: Now, you just touched on the fact that you have two children, you're married. What does your spouse think when you're on these trips?

Mark Robinson: Oh, she loves it. She used to come chasing with me all the time. And now that the youngest one is getting close to an age where she can be left with parents and stuff, Beth, can't wait to get back out chasing with me. Both of my daughters went on their first storm chase when they were two weeks old, so there's that, too. This was very safe. I actually won't take either one of them out for tornadoes. Although, my older one, I have no choice. I will take her out on tornadoes, and I did take her out on one tornado day where we saw 13 water spouts out in your Goderich in Ontario, so that was kind of a wild day.

Scott Simmie: Wow. I'm curious because I'm thinking to myself, "Now, if I were somewhere like that, where potentially my health might be in jeopardy by simply being there," I suspect that I might get a call from my wife saying, "Honey, I'd really prefer if you just didn't stay there. Can you get yourself somewhere safer? But that isn't the case when you're out, it's occupational hazard and Beth knows that you know what you're doing?"

Mark Robinson: She knows that if I'm out with George and we're doing volcanoes in the South Pacific, we're taking every single risk management that we can do. We want to come back. We want to show off these things that we've seen, parts of planet earth, that not a lot of other people get to see or experience. And so, we're being as careful as possible, and she knows that even in the storms, I'm maybe a little more conservative than other people so I tend to back off the tornadoes a little more than other people, because I know that I've got a family I will have to come back to. I'm not 18 anymore and think that I'm completely invincible, which I'm not.

Scott Simmie: On one of those nights where it's pitch black and you're soaking wet and freezing somewhere and being pelted by little bits of debris with no power in your hotel, have you ever thought, "This past time sucks. This job sucks. I'm done with this"?

Mark Robinson: Oh, there's moments I think like that, and then I'll see something cool and go, "No, this is the best thing ever." Yeah. I mean, there's times where it's like, "I'm wet, I'm cold, I'm tired. Oh my God, I can't..." The feedback to the office isn't working, somebody at the studio is just sitting there waiting that was like, "Oh, just wait a minute, Mark," and I'm sitting in the snow and there's snow dripping down my neck and I'm like... But at the same time, I have gotten to do some stuff that very few other people in the world get to do. So, yeah, I love my job. There's really no getting around it. I do love it.

Scott Simmie: Just a couple more questions, and one of them is the topic of climate change. Prior to the pandemic, we all seemed to be talking about that. Do you and other chasers think that we are seeing more extreme weather or greater intensity to the extreme weather that we're seeing?

Mark Robinson: We actually shot a whole episode of Storm Hunters on the changing nature of Tornado Alley. And so, we got a chance to talk to a bunch of top scientists in and around the States, obviously, all over Tornado alley, and we asked them that exact question. The one thing that they have found that there's a little bit of a stronger evidence for, is that there's a clustering of these events, so rather than seeing, say... Let's just take July as an example. Say in July, you see one thunderstorm a day, that's

perfect, because that's really good for the farmers because you're getting a little bit of watering every single day for your crops. It's perfect. What we're seeing now is that same 30 thunderstorms, so there's not really a change in the number of thunderstorms, but what we're seeing is that rather than getting one per day, we're getting nothing for seven days and then 10 on one day, and then nothing for another seven days, and then 15 on another day.

Mark Robinson: So, what's happening is not so much a change in how much thunderstorm action we're seeing, but what we're seeing is that it's concentrated on a couple of days. And that's a big problem for farmers because we don't have a really good way of capturing that water for irrigation of the crops, so we're seeing more and more equipment having to be bought and put onto the farms to make sure the crops are watered. And that's why you see a corresponding increase in your food prices. But when you get down to the real science, there's no question. There's no real question. We're just down to quibbling about details in science now, as opposed to whether it's happening or not.

Scott Simmie: I understand for chasers that there is a tradition involving a steak dinner on certain days. Could you tell us what that's about?

Mark Robinson: Yeah. I don't even know where it started. But there's this thing, if you see a tornado, you're allowed to have a steak dinner, and God forbid you have a steak dinner before you see a tornado because the rest of the people in your team will quite literally murder you. Yeah. I mean, it's running joke, but yeah, it's one of those things, you're not allowed to have a steak dinner if you're down on your two week Tornado Alley chase until you've seen a tornado. And there's been a couple of years where I have gotten no steak dinners, and there's been a couple of years where I've had to carry over the steak dinners to the next year because I've seen so many.

Scott Simmie: Well, listen, you haven't heard this sound before, at least for me, but that indicates that we are hitting the final, rapid fire round, where I'm just going to ask you a few quick questions and I'm looking for super fast answers. So, here we go. Tornado Alley or the Canadian prairies.

Mark Robinson: Oh man. Both. I'm going to have to say both. Both are amazing.

Scott Simmie: Would you rather cover a tornado or a hurricane? And I think you touched on this earlier. And why?

Mark Robinson: Oh man. Tornadoes, for the sheer beauty of them. Hurricanes, for the sheer experience of them. They're two different monsters.

Scott Simmie: What's your Twitter handle?

Mark Robinson: StormhunterTWN.

Scott Simmie: What are you really looking forward to doing when the pandemic is over that you can't do now?

Mark Robinson: Oh boy. See all my friends.

Scott Simmie: Nice. Listen, Mark Robinson, meteorologist, storm hunter, guy who stood inside a volcano but not right on the lava, even a scuba diver, thanks for sharing your inside story today. It's been great.

Mark Robinson: My pleasure. It's been fun. Thank you.

Scott Simmie: Mark was a lot of fun to speak with today, and here's a little known fact. Many years ago, as a reporter, I traveled with Mark and other storm chasers to Tornado Alley. I saw the biggest storm, a supercell, that I have ever seen in my life. It was incredible. It was powerful. It was unforgettable. And it was dangerous. If you're interested in chasing, connect with some experienced people, take lots of photos, and please, don't take unnecessary risks. I'm Scott Simmie, and this has been Inside Stories. Though, today, it was a little more about being outside. Take care. I'll see you in a week.

Legal Disclaimer: The views expressed here are those of the participants and not those of Bank of Montreal, it's affiliates, or subsidiaries.