

Eyes on the skies

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Local weather watchers help keep community safe

Ross Ostergard and Chris Hodges got into storm watching for two entirely different reasons.

Ostergard, a weather spotter for the National Weather Service (NWS) for five years, wanted to give back to the community when family friends were kind to him after a traffic accident several years ago.

“I got to know a lot of folks and felt like I owed them,” Ostergard said. “and I wanted to protect this town from danger.”

Hodges, who works at I-80 Pit Stop, said he grew tired of sitting at home while storms hammered the city and weather warnings were sometimes issued late.

The city sits at the western edge of Dawson County which is covered by NWS officials in Hastings. North Platte, which is in Lincoln County and much closer to Gothenburg, is where another NWS office is located.

“That’s the reason we’ve stepped up for Gothenburg,” Hodges said.

So when Ostergard’s weather-watching partner quit, Hodges said he agreed to help his friend and will finish his second year as a NWS weather watcher this fall.

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As storm spotters, the two attend a two-hour program presented by the NWS each spring.

Once severe weather season arrives, they drive to specific locations south, north and west of Gothenburg to watch the clouds when NWS officials expect large hail or damaging winds in excess of 60 mph.

“Anytime there’s a watch or warning, we try to go out,” Hodges said, noting that they separate when watching southern and northern skies but pair up when severe weather is predicted in the west. “Two sets of eyes are always better than one.”

The duo has learned to watch for certain circulation patterns in the clouds and the appearance of shelf or wall clouds. Generally speaking, they said the shelf cloud could appear on the front edge of a storm while wall clouds are usually located at the rear of severe weather.

So far this year, Ostergard said weather patterns have been strange.

“Storms have come out of nowhere. Because of heat and humidity, they build big cloud banks,” he explained. “Often you don’t know what you’re going to get until you get a warning.”

For Hodges, it’s beautiful to watch thunderheads bloom on the horizon.

“And once you’ve seen what we’ve seen by storm spotting, it doesn’t look the same anymore,” he explained. “Once you start inspecting the clouds and what they’re going to produce, it becomes a challenge.”

Ostergard describes what they do as a rush and a thrill because it can be dangerous.

Hodges said watching for storms can be hazardous if you don’t respect Mother Nature.

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“You have to know when to go and when to stay,” he said. “You have to know how to track storms safely because it can go from one extreme to another—sunny one minute and a storm barreling down the next.”

Ostergard remembers well when he another spotter watched a tornado “sit down and spread out” north of Farnam in April of 2007. Recorded as having up to 207 mph winds, it whirled through farmsteads south, west and north of Gothenburg.

“It was pitch black but we saw it during a lightning flash and we tore through the canyons for home about 80 mph,” he said. “The weather service says to not even try and track tornadoes in the dark because you don’t know where they are.”

Hodges recalls a storm in early July last year when he was watching ominous clouds south of Banner Road.

“I saw a huge shelf cloud coming from the west and there was no wind at all,” he said. “After it passed, it rocked my entire vehicle back and forth and I thought ‘Whoa dude.’ ”

As the days grow shorter and the evenings cooler, the chance of severe weather normally declines.

Not this year, Ostergard said, noting that NWS predicts secondary fronts throughout September that could cause severe storms.

Occasionally storms build in Nebraska during late fall.

In fact, Hodges remembers watching evil-looking thunderheads build to the northeast on Halloween night in 2000 which later produced a devastating tornado in Oconto.

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Once severe weather season ends, however, he said he enjoys down time until storm-spotting class in the spring when the “weather gets going.”

“Then we’re ready for the chase again.”

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