

# Hunt for the Supertwister

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International

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Around dusk on April 28, 2002, a deadly tornado touched down on the outskirts of La Plata, Maryland. Within minutes, it cut a narrow but devastating gash through the town, uprooting trees and tearing houses from their foundations. Four people died and more than 100 were injured. La Plata became number 94 on the list of US locations struck by the most severe, or F-5, category of tornado since records were first kept in 1880. An F-5 tornado represents a natural phenomenon of almost unimaginable violence, as elusive, unpredictable, and terrifying as an attack by a Great White Shark.

How can scientists begin to forecast these lethal storms? For two decades, a University of Oklahoma team of "stormchasers," led by meteorology professor Howard Bluestein, has specialized in hunting down tornadoes, collecting data that they hope will someday save lives and eliminate the guesswork in predicting the next F-5 disaster.

In the early 1980s, they attempted to race ahead of tornadoes and place a 400-pound package of instruments (nicknamed "Toto") directly in the path of the funnel. This risky approach, sensationalized in the movie *Twister*, nearly cost the team their lives. Today, they take a more cautious approach. "It would be fascinating to actually get inside the tornado and take a look around," Bluestein says. "Since we can't, we try to get close enough to aim our portable radar unit and measure the wind field in and around the tornado. That information helps us to learn more about how twisters form."

NOVA producers accompany Bluestein and other researchers as they begin a fresh effort to capture data from the most severe storms. In addition to the usual attempts to chase twisters both on the ground and by plane, a new monitoring approach will be tried for the first time. A network of radar stations installed across Oklahoma will feed back data that should give up to six hours' warning of a lethal storm. In addition, high-powered supercomputers will simulate the storm and produce spectacular, realistic graphics of these terrifying twisters. *Hunt for the Supertwister* will give viewers a front-row seat on the risky and thrilling art of storm chasing, complete with the latest research findings and state-of-the-art visual effects.

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## NOVA

CREDITS

*Executive Producer:* Paula S. Apsell

*Producer:* Tom Lucas

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