

Other weather events and Overpasses by KI5LNM

In this three part tornado study we have looked at the El Reno 2013 tornado and some lessons one can learn from it. The most important being to not lose situational awareness. Part 2 we looked at why overpasses are quite dangerous places to shelter from a tornado for several reasons. Tonight we will look at other weather situations and again why one shouldn't shelter at an overpass.

Any severe weather event can be affected by the combination of that weather and overpasses.

An example of this is the Jarrell tornado on 27 May 1997. Before anyone actually saw a tornado on the ground, traffic on I-35 was already being stopped and backed up. Drivers were seeking shelter from the storm at the overpasses and as they filled up the area, the vehicles behind were trapped on the road. What saved all these people trapped in the open was that the tornado when it fully formed took a path south-southwest. This ran parallel to the highway. This is basically the opposite of what is considered normal for tornadoes, but thankfully for these people, it did, or there would have been devastation on the highway. There was almost five miles of stopped traffic on I-35 by the time the tornado came near and all were sitting ducks.

Lesson. When you stop to hide under an overpass during a storm, you are trapping the people behind you out in the open and generally no way to get out of their situation.

At Lancaster, Texas on the night of 25 April 1994 there was a thunderstorm that did produce a tornado, but the near disaster was at I-20 where the tornado did not pass, but there was golf ball hail. So with low visibility cars were stopping under the overpass to shelter from the hail. Now with low visibility what could have happened as other cars came up behind the stopped cars that blocked the road? Yeah, this could have lead to one massive pile up. But secondly, they ended up with a couple miles of stopped traffic on a highway with few options and a severe tornado forming just to their south. Once again, thankfully, it did not travel their way but if it had what damage it could have done as there was no escape for the majority of the people those cars.

Lesson. It can be better to get a bit of hail damage than to cause a pile up behind you as you think you are doing what is safe for you and your vehicle. Better to have some hail damage than to cause more serious damage to human life.

This last note happens in Houston about every major storm they have. You need to be aware and do not get lackadaisical about it. In a severe thunderstorm one of the most dangerous places to be is an underpass, especially in cities. They are often the low ground and flash floods happen quickly in these areas. In Minneapolis/St. Paul area 1 July 1997, there was a severe storm at 7:15 pm. There was golf ball size hail, 100 mph wind gusts, and blinding rain. People out driving found shelter under the overpasses. Alas, what they had done was get in the one place that would be the most dangerous. The rain was coming down at a rate of 4-6 inches an hour. Flash flooding was rapid. Many people found themselves in severe danger in the very place they sought shelter. They all had to be rescued. I know while we lived in the Houston area that on the news, we'd learn many times of people who would drive into the underpass areas in heavy rains and drown. It happened too quickly for rescue.

Lesson. There are better places to go than under an overpass during severe storms. maybe stop and get a bite to eat and ride it out than keep driving. Especially if it is at a lower elevation than the land around it. This could be an issue where 21 crosses over 77. Better to not drive through there if any chance of water building up.

So after looking at part 2 and 3 with overpasses, we need to get the word out that despite a few decades of hearing that overpasses are safe, they are not safe. We need to give positive places that are safer in a storm or tornado. Suggestions would be: to remain in your house (unless a mobile home). Yes, people have been known to leave their homes to take shelter at an overpass.

In the Bridge Creek/Moore tornado outbreak 3 May 1999, the people who sheltered in basements or interior rooms of their homes made it out with some only having minor injuries. That can't be said for those under the overpasses.

As a last reminder here are some thoughts.

If you block an overpass:

1. You can block traffic moving easily
2. You can cut off the only escape route available
3. You can block the only passages for emergency vehicles
4. You can force others into unsafe situations against their will. Do you want to be responsible for the danger you put them in?
5. Then especially at night time and low visibility times, you can cause major traffic disasters.

The current advice to be safe in Open-Country from a tornado is:

1. Do not stay in an automobile or any vehicle.
2. Do not try and outrun a tornado, it is better to leave your car. Now if you have some distance and have an escape route that runs perpendicular away from the tornado, you may try and outrun it, but first be sure of its path, be aware of the wind that extends beyond the visible funnel, and be aware of any safe spot that you are sure you can get to, such as a building or ditch.
3. If outside or in a vehicle find the lowest area such as a ditch or depression and lie down flat. Remember that wind speed is almost none existent at the ground level.

Once again situational awareness is crucial to surviving a tornado. One shouldn't just sneak up on you. One can learn more about what the weather is like before a tornado and if it is looking possible be listening to the weather reports.