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APRIL 2004

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

**CHASING**

# **TORNADOES**

**A TALE OF SCIENCE,  
GUTS, AND LUCK**

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## THE COVER

An F3 tornado explodes across the South Dakota prairie.

BY CARSTEN PETER

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# 04578

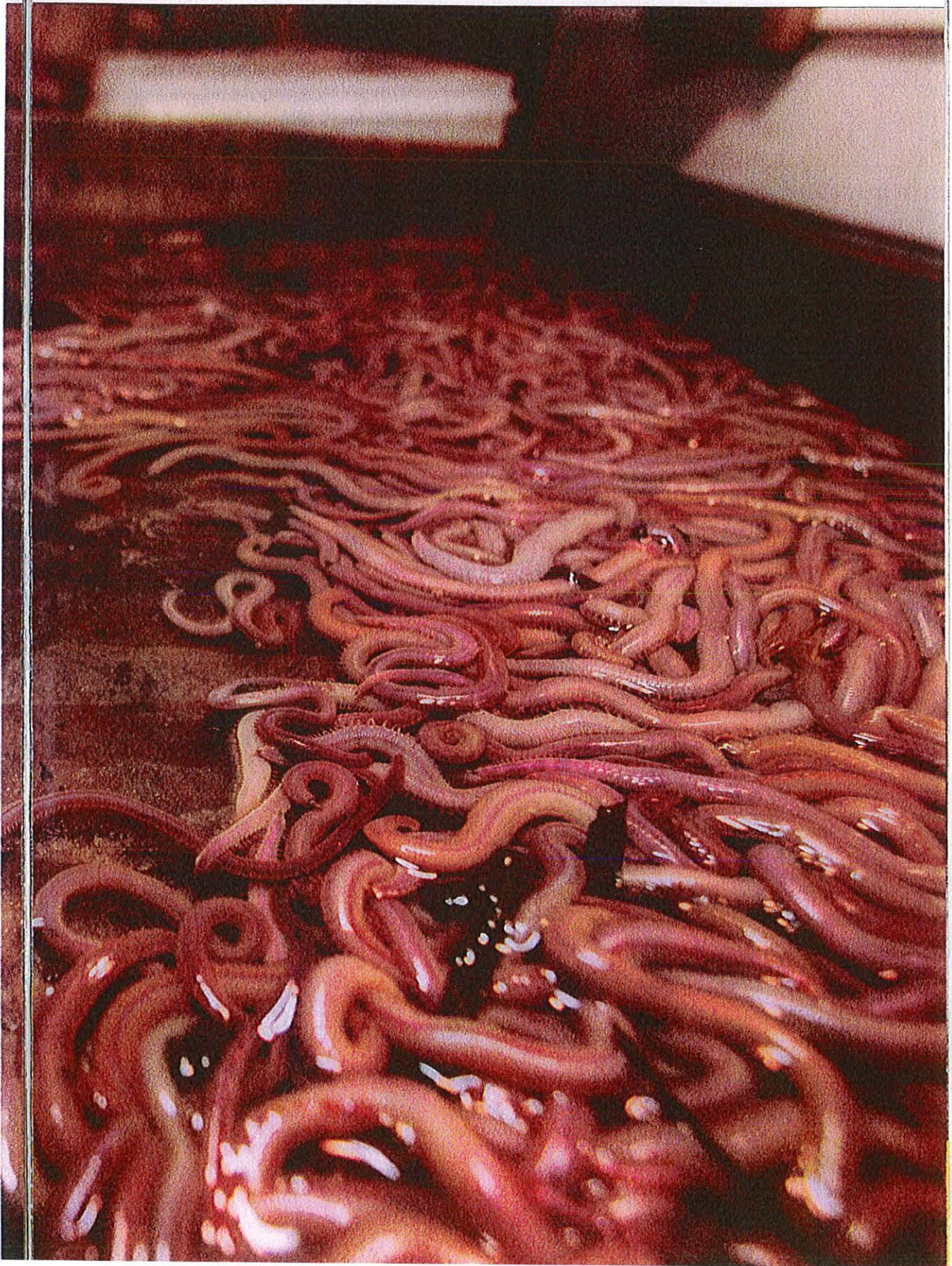
## Worm Capital of the World

BY CATHY NEWMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSÉ AZEL

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SENIOR WRITER

Worm wrangler Dennis Hill corrals his squirming stock of bloodworms at Harbor Bait Company before shipping them to sport-fishermen and retailers across the U.S. These slimy carnivores never give Hill the creeps. "Why would they?" he asks.









Worms aren't the first thing you see in the worm capital of the world. Instead, Wiscasset looks like a picture postcard. The best view is from the east, looking across the gray-green marshes of the Sheepscot River to the town, which sits on a hillside. Four white spires lift from the foliage in a tableau of vintage New England. On a roadside sign outside town, Wiscasset calls itself the prettiest village in Maine, but the origin of that sobriquet remains a mystery. "A bit of hubris," observed Chris Cooper, a columnist for the weekly *Wiscasset Newspaper*. "The sign ought to say: 'We're not a real town yet, but we're getting there.'"

Despite the acid overlay, his remark reflects the exasperation of a parent for an errant child. Wiscasset, like much of the Maine coast, has joined the Realm of Quaint. What once was hardware store, drugstore, and newsstand has become boutiques, antique stores (two dozen, at least), and a gourmet food shop where four and a half ounces of foie gras sells for \$20.

"What we have now is a tourist business," Marguerite Rafter said. Mrs. Rafter, who married into a Wiscasset shipping family now ten generations old; lives in a 200-year-old house within sight and sound of U.S. 1, which also happens to be the town's Main Street. "You are lucky if you go downtown and know *anyone*," she said, as traffic rumbled past her living room window.

So what to do? I asked her contemporary, 86-year-old Jane Tucker.

A descendant of another old Wiscasset family, Miss Tucker until recently lived near the end of High Street, where the mercantile upper crust built their homes in the 1800s. Now a museum, Castle Tucker, as the mansion is known, is an architectural chowder: part federal, part Victorian, with a dash of Scottish castle. Miss Tucker, its steward, has pewter gray hair worn in a soft pageboy and piercing eyes behind big framed

After the daily tidal wave of summer traffic has receded on Main Street, also known as U.S. 1, a handful of vacationers place orders at Red's Eats. Daytime lines can be 75 deep, and last summer owner Al Gagnon served six tons of his legendary lobster rolls.



**04578**

**POPULATION:**

4,350

**WORM-DIGGING**

**LICENSES (2003): 73**

**LOBSTER LICENSES**

**(2003): 18**

**VALUE OF MAINE WORMS**

**(2002): \$8 million**

**PEAK DAILY SUMMER**

**TRAFFIC, MAIN STREET:**

About 26,000 cars



## WISCASSET, MAINE

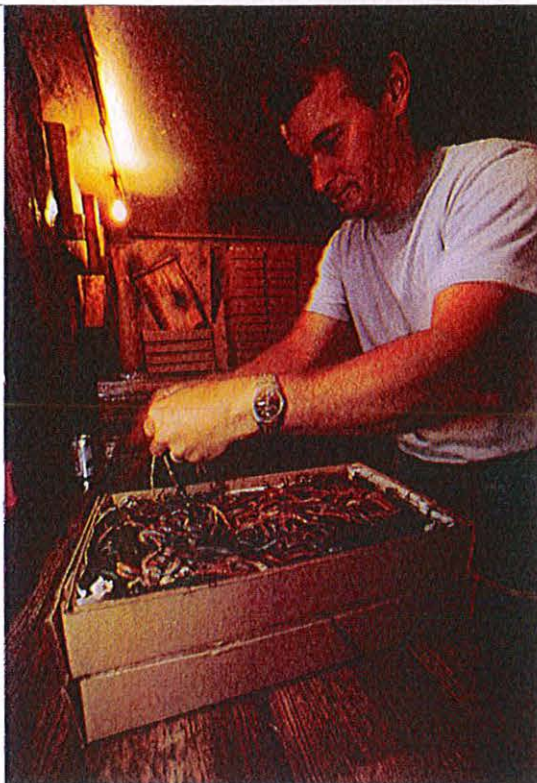
glasses. Her answer, like Miss Tucker herself, was direct and unsparing. "What to do? Why, die. Get out of the way," she said.

Wiscasset's claim to worm capital of the world, like its prettiest village status, may not be provable but is certainly believable.

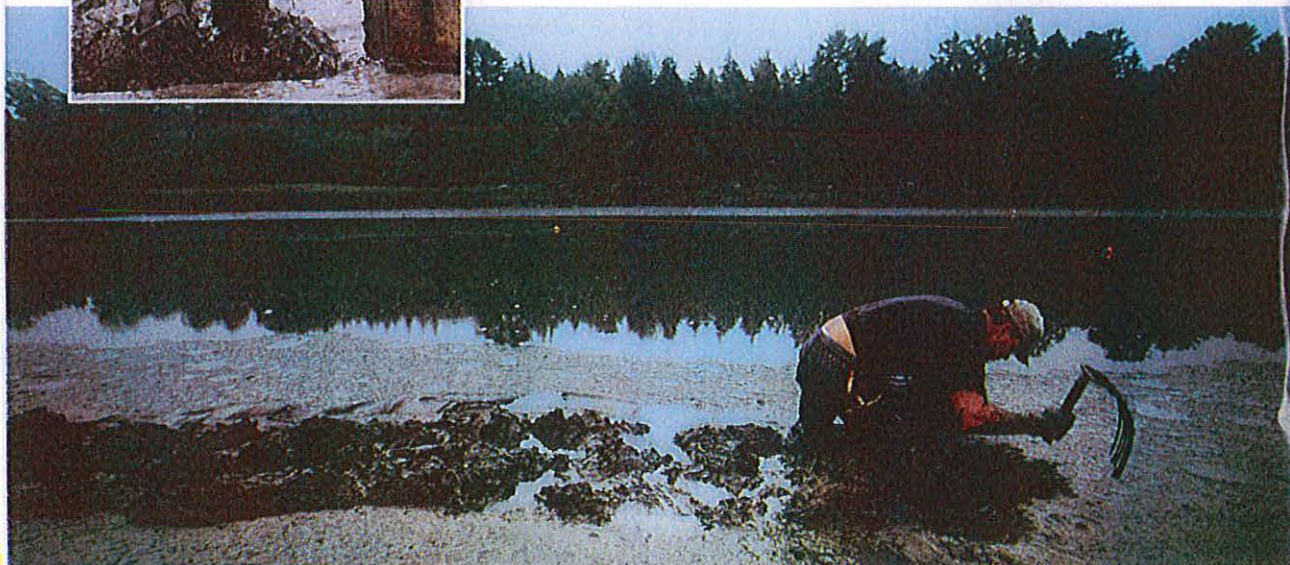
We're talking bloodworms and sandworms here. If you're a bait fisherman, you know exactly what that means. If not, then take it on faith that worms are to a flounder what foie gras is to a Frenchman—a delicacy to die for. A fisherman in California will happily fork over 50 cents a worm for the pleasure of placing a wriggling piece of slime on the hook in hopes of catching The Big One.

A worm digger works knee-deep in taupe-colored, fetid mud that clings to legs like a drowning man to a buoy. At my behest Doug Schmal, a third-generation digger, took me out on the mudflats. Watch that first step out of the boat. Mine was a disaster. I sank deep in mud, hopelessly stuck. Knowing I could never break loose, I left my boots in the mud, slogged to higher, solid ground, and sat on a rock while Schmal pulled them out. Then I watched him hack through the muck with his hoe in search of his quarry. Smirk if you like at the idea of digging worms: On a good day Schmal makes \$180 for five hours' work (at 12 cents a sandworm, that adds up to 1,500 worms) and takes the rest of the day off to play golf. Of course there are 30 days, and, he hastens to add, "I have a hardworking wife who helps support me."

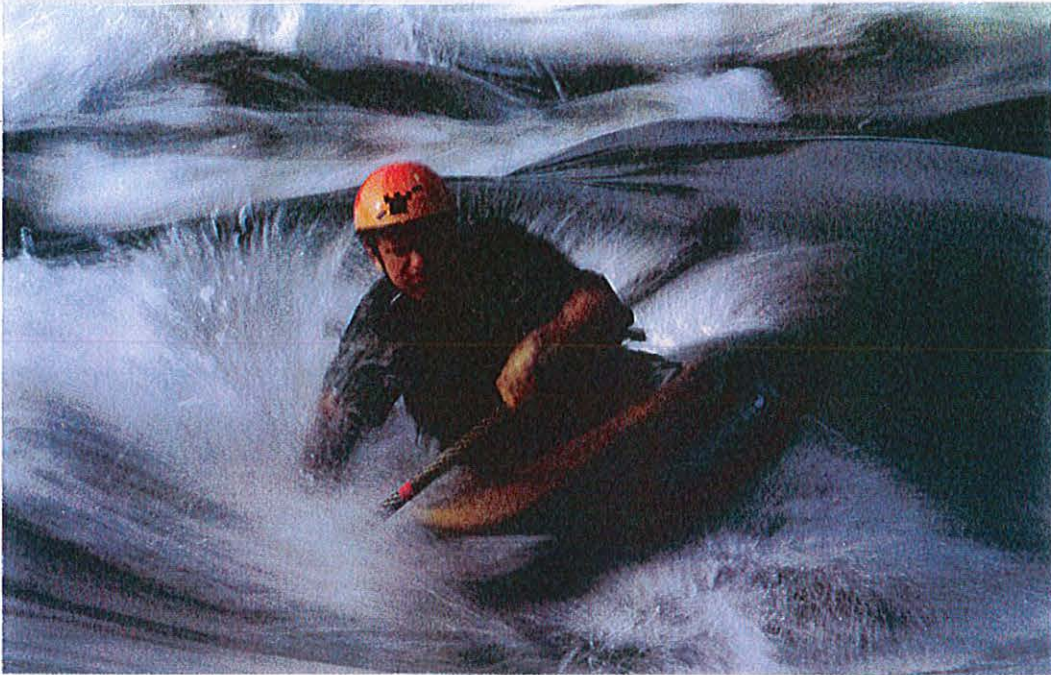
The prime hangout for worm diggers is the Miss Wiscasset Diner south of town, where U.S. 1 becomes the town's commercial strip. The usual roadside flora prevails: gas stations, motels, a trailer or two, and Big Al's Super Values. Big Al is Al Cohen, the self-proclaimed Undertaker of Merchandise,



David Cronk (above) piles sandworms in his bait cellar, where he pays diggers like childhood pal Doug Schmal (below and left) 12 cents a worm. "It's a backbreaking job, but it gets in your blood," says Schmal, a third-generation digger who toils in the "gooey, sloppy" mudflats of the Back River.







and Wiscasset has never known a bigger booster, even though he is, in local parlance, “from away.” Big Al (who at 300 pounds lives up to his name) is from Queens, New York. He immigrated to Maine 16 years ago after being robbed three times in six months.

“There are people who decorate their house in Modern Big Al’s and Antique Salvation Army,” Al said, showing me his merchandise, which consists of manufacturers’ overstocks and odd-lot leftovers from catalog houses. He picked up a plastic bird from a bin. “Don’t You Know You Need One Of These?” he said in his TV voice. (Big Al stars in his own television commercials.)

“Is it an ostrich?” I asked.

“Not an ostrich,” he corrected. “Here they should know from ostriches? This is a Lawn Bird.” He picked up a ceramic bowl and offered another marketing lesson. “In some places this is a pasta dish.” It was one of a huge lot of bowls that didn’t sell—at first. “Then I called them *chowdah* bowls. Now I sell 230 cases a year.” That’s Yankee ingenuity by way of Queens for you.

We moved on. “And Don’t You Need One Of These?” he boomed, lifting a coffee mug shaped like a cow’s hindquarters.

A woman in the adjacent aisle pricked up her ears and headed our way.

“Get it before it’s gone,” he said.

She practically broke into a run.

“Life’s been good to you?” I asked him.

“Can’t complain. I won the lottery,” he said, by which he meant the jackpot in the lottery of life. “I came to Maine.”

I stopped by the counter to choose my Free Gift (Big Al has the Only Free Gift Bar In Maine!) and couldn’t decide between a ring made of indeterminate metal with LOVE on it, or one with a peace sign.

“Take both,” said Big Al.

Why not? I should get it before it’s gone. □

Four miles upriver from town a freestyle kayaker surfs the onrushing tide at Sheepscot Reversing Falls. “It’s a balancing act, like riding a bucking bronco,” says river guide “Dutch” Holland, who has the scars to prove it. “Wiscasset is very much tied to the water. Everybody lives by a tide chart here.”

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