

Biology don saw how twister formed

By KAN YAW CHONG

KOTA KINABALU: Associate Professor of Biology, Menno Schilthuizen couldn't believe his eyes.

At 3.15pm Thursday, he was checking for e-mails on his computer in his office at UMS' Institute of Tropical Biology.

As he gazed out of the window, he was staring right at one of rarest of phenomena in Malaysia – a tropical twister rotating violently in Gaya Bay.

"I feel quite lucky," he said. "People always expect to see things like that in Mid West USA but here it was, my first experience of a twister in Malaysia." It was one of those familiar stormy days in Kota Kinabalu. Thick dark clouds were brewing over the skies of Gaya Bay.

From the vantage point of his office set on a ridge top, he said: "I noticed this big black thing dropping down from the thunder cloud, a very distinct, long, narrow trunk like that of an elephant coming down from the cloud and then touching the water," Dr Menno said.

As it hit the sea, there was a splash and sprays of water, he said.

"At first, the twister was quite broad but got narrower and a few

times, it disappeared but formed again, changed shape but did not change position," he said.

"A fishing boat was passing close by," he noted, adding, "They must have felt the full power of this thing!"

The twister was located about one kilometre north of Pulau Gaya and probably two to three kilometres from Kota Kinabalu, he said.

The height of the twister was about 200 metres, he reckoned.

Given the right condition, rare twisters like this form when a warm storm updraft (rising column of hot air) interacts with winds and picks up a cold current in the thunder cloud.

Since cold air is denser and therefore heavier, it sinks, probably through the column of hot tube created by the updraft. This results in a violent rotating column of air extending from within a thunder cloud down sea level. That probably was what Dr Menno saw – a spectacular drop of cold air from the beginning to the end which lasted about 15 minutes.

He said many of his university colleagues saw it but unfortunately, none was able to land hands on a camera, however much they wanted to capture the rare spectacle on film.