

Birds Brave Hurricane Gustav Evacuations

Louisiana area hurricane preparations prevent birds and owners from ruffled feathers.

By Angela Pham

Posted: September 10, 2008, 2:30 p.m. EDT

Courtesy IFAW/Michael Booth

This Cockatiel was evacuated to the Shreveport, Louisiana, mega shelter.

Courtesy IFAW/Michael Booth

Jennifer Miller of the IFAW holds a cockatiel that was evacuated to the Shreveport, Louisiana, mega shelter.

Keeping an African grey parrot, a quaker parrot, an Amazon parrot, two cockatiels, three budgerigars (parakeets) and 20 doves in a single shelter that's housing more than 1,000 animals during a major hurricane sounds like a recipe for chaos.

But this was no Hurricane Katrina.

At the Louisiana State Fairgrounds in Shreveport, Louisiana, during the first week of September 2008, when Hurricane Gustav threatened the entire Gulf Coast area, animals of assorted breeds and species filled the shelter, including nearly 30 birds, yet the process ran smoothly.

"As opposed to Katrina, the major difference is that [bird owners] were able to take their pets with them," said Kelley Weir, spokeswoman for the American Humane Association, whose members worked in the "mega shelter" at Shreveport's fairgrounds to help evacuate animals. "It's to the point right now where animals were pre-evacuated, people were pre-evacuated and human shelters were set up near animal shelters so the owners could be close to their animals."

And the preparation paid off. Buses provided by the state for evacuations only permit dogs, cats and small companion animals. So although birds and other exotic pets aren't allowed on the government-organized and run transportation buses that travel to the evacuation sites, plenty of parrot and other bird owners took matters into their own hands and brought their birds to the shelter themselves. A nearby shelter for people allowed bird owners to feed and take care of their birds on the fairgrounds without traveling far.

Jennifer Miller, shelter leader with the International Fund for Animal Welfare, said she was pleasantly surprised to see the birds flocking in to the shelter.

"It was a surprise, not because we didn't expect people to evacuate them, but because this is a state-organized shelter," Miller said. "So when the owners did show up, we expressed our gratitude constantly. So wonderful that they brought their animals, made the effort."

Birds and other exotic pets, all inside their carriers and cages, were kept separately from the canines and cats on a patio area of the shelter with good ventilation. When the storm came closer, they were moved inside to a safer location, Miller said. Noah's Wish, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Humane Society of the United States and the Animal Rescue League of Boston all joined Miller and the IFAW in caring for the pets at the shelter whose owners couldn't during evacuations.

Miller took the opportunity to work with bird owners to educate them on cage cleaning and nutritional advice. But the process wasn't all business: "I like to think that the birds all bonded with each other," Miller said. "Walking in there, standing outside the door, you could hear them all mumbling, talking to each other."

Near the end of the first week of September, the owners of the birds began reuniting with their pets, starting the re-entry process. Thanks to the advance preparations made by the state of Louisiana and the efforts of humane organizations, the parrots were able to return to their homes unscathed, for which bird owners expressed their gratitude.

"The quaker parrot, his owner was a 12- or 13-year-old boy," Miller said. "The parrot and him are best friends: They sleep together, go on bike rides together. It was so cute. To be able to do that for him, knowing how important this animal is to him, it's something we were really happy to do."

"He was really grateful. He had to drop his animal off and wasn't really sure if it would be cared for, if it would be safe, but

eventually he realized that it was OK, and he felt good about it."