

A Moment to “Paws” and Reflect on Pets and Wildlife During Hurricane Harvey

By Carmen Crandell

Many pet owners love their pets and treat them like family members, but this intense affection also forces them to make agonizing choices when it comes to evacuating in times of natural disasters. During Hurricane Harvey, some had no choice but to leave their beloved pets behind when fleeing the rising waters, while others were able to carry their pets with them to safety. Evacuation was only the beginning; pet owners had to find accommodations that allowed their animals to join them. Some evacuees found refuge in the homes of family and friends, but others arrived at local shelters, which did not necessarily welcome pets.

A lack of pet-friendly options consistently presented an obstacle for pet owners facing evacuation. Captain Nathan Lilley, a firefighter and paramedic with the Houston Fire Department (HFD), remembered seeing people who were not trapped initially but stayed in their homes to protect their pets. When HFD responded, he noted, “The water was three and four feet high into their living space, but they didn’t want to leave because they didn’t want to lose their pets.”¹ In some cases, first responders had to cut holes into the roof to rescue pet owners from their attics.

While no pet owner wants to leave their pet behind, they might feel they have no choice. José Manuel Méndez evacuated from his home in Spring on August 25, 2017. The

family did not anticipate the water rising so high, and, at the last minute, decided to evacuate to Mexia, Texas, two hours away. José’s truck had enough space to carry the family of six and their small dog but not enough room for their big dog. They made the tough decision to leave him behind with food, hoping José could return.²

The floodwaters continued to rise and by the next morning, the “kids [were] really frantic,” scared the dog might drown. José decided to return to his home, purchasing a kayak to rescue his dog. Along the way, he met someone with a larger boat who volunteered to take him home. When he arrived, the water in the street was up to his chest while the water in his house was above his knees. Once inside, José found his dog on the couch attempting to avoid the floodwater. Thankfully, the Méndez family avoided heartache, but not all pet owners were so fortunate.³



Perla King and her beloved Shrek, who she lost during Hurricane Harvey.

Photo courtesy of Perla King.

Perla King had no way to take her pet donkey, Shrek, with her when she evacuated. The police forced everyone in her Crosby neighborhood, northeast of Houston, to evacuate during the storm because officials feared the nearby Arkema chemical plant could explode. The army evacuated Perla, her husband, their dog, and many of their neighbors, but Shrek had to stay behind.⁴

Worried about their donkey, the Kings tried many times to go home and care for him, but the police turned them away. Finally, on August 31, 2017, one policeman let them in to check on Shrek, who was not doing well. As they tried to feed him, the chemical plant burst into flames, and they had no choice but to leave their donkey yet again. After the explosion, no one was allowed into the neighborhood, including veterinarians, for more than a week.⁵

Upon returning home, Perla remembered seeing many dead animals in the street. She immediately checked on



When his family evacuated, José Manuel Méndez was forced to leave his bigger dog at home due to lack of space in his truck. Fortunately, the dog was safe when Méndez returned for him.

Photo courtesy of the Méndez family.

Shrekky who was now very ill. All she could do was say good-bye before he died shortly thereafter. When remembering all she lost during Harvey, Perla reflected, “The vehicles, that [we] can make up ... The most [important] thing that we lost, that hurt, was my pet, my donkey.”⁶



Maggie, Lynne Boone’s cat, suffered from trauma long after Hurricane Harvey’s water receded.

Photo courtesy of Lynne Boone.

Unlike larger pets, Lynne Boone’s cat, Maggie, could easily be carried when evacuating during Hurricane Harvey. Lynne and her husband, John, who live near Lake Houston, did not anticipate needing to leave until the water started rising nonstop. Not expecting to be gone long, they brought a jar of cat food but no cat litter. Fortunately, a friend took them in and also provided for Maggie’s needs. Lynne believes Maggie was traumatized by their nomadic lifestyle after

Harvey, which involved staying in seven different places before they returned home about ten months later. Even back at home, Maggie stayed right by their side for security.⁷

Flooded homes were not the only challenges facing pets and their owners. Veterinary hospitals, where many animals were housed, also flooded, presenting challenges for animal safety. Dr. Max Heimlich, a veterinarian at Stuebner Airline Veterinary Hospital, was working on Friday, August 25, 2017, the day Hurricane Harvey made landfall. To prepare, he and the hospital staff transported the animals to the facility’s second floor and called the pets’ owners to assure them their pets were safe.⁸



Dr. Max Heimlich is a veterinarian at Stuebner Airline Veterinary Hospital, where he helped move all of the pets to a safer location to escape the flooding.

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.

The floodwaters steadily rose, and by Sunday, they had to use fifteen boats to evacuate all forty-four pets to an employee’s nearby home. The pets spent Sunday night in her barn, and employees called the pet owners to inform them of their pets’ location and that they were safe. The pet owners had the option of either picking up their pet or letting employees move them to a shelter, where they would be well cared for until their owners could get them.⁹

As part of the family, pets should be part of the evacuation plan. When preparing

for a natural disaster, Dr. Heimlich suggested to pet owners: “Make sure that you have some sort of ID on the pet or a microchip under the skin on the pet, so the pet can be identified if for some reason you have to be evacuated, and [you] cannot take the pet or if the pet escapes when you’re trying to evacuate in a hurry. ... That’s the single most important thing.” Heimlich also suggested taking bottled water, a small amount of pet food, and a crate or a cage when evacuating, all of which he saw as imperative to the process.¹⁰ Though natural disasters are difficult for everyone involved, having a plan prior to a disaster can prevent the unnecessary loss of a pet.

Houstonians not only lost pets, but local wildlife was also displaced or killed by the storm. Forced from their habitats, alligators and snakes appeared in residents’ yards, seeking higher ground. Volunteers rescued hundreds of bats from their home under the Waugh Bridge, and passers-by saw bats clinging to buildings. Many wild animals and livestock in the region perished during Harvey with nowhere to go. As Lynne Boone evacuated, she recalled seeing “five large deer swimming down the canal towards the lake. And the water [was] at their neckline.” It made her sad as she realized “they were swimming towards the water, not away from it.”¹¹

Harvey affected the lives of every Houston inhabitant, directly or indirectly, including local animals. As family members, pets are invaluable, especially during tough times when they can be a great comfort. Perhaps that is why even in times of disaster, we refuse to leave their side — no matter the cost or how high the water. At the end of the day, our pets are family — whether they slither, swim, or walk on all fours.

Carmen Crandell is a student in the University of Houston Honors College majoring in history and minoring in classical studies. She is most interested in ancient history, specifically ancient Greece, and plans to attend graduate school to ultimately become a museum curator.



Two rescuers carry a scared golden retriever to safety as rain from Hurricane Harvey continues to fall. Photo courtesy of Francine Spiering.