

PETS' PLIGHT



AP photo by Dave Martin

Dogs take refuge atop a flooded car this week in New Orleans. Rescuers are making more time to save abandoned pets.

Public howling turns tide for four-legged evacuees

By Susan Berger and Michael Martinez
Chicago Tribune

NEW ORLEANS — Two disheveled dogs and a cat flew with their people to Iowa on Friday, where they got food, a bath and a physical exam.

The scene, a far cry from the wrenching images of stranded pooches on rooftops, was a victory for pet lovers, who have beseeched the government to allow pets to remain with their owners during evacuations.

Heartbreaking stories about people being forced to leave

pets behind—and estimates that 50,000 dogs and cats were stranded in Hurricane Katrina's wake—have filled Internet message boards. On Thursday, an urgent message told of 150 dogs on the rooftop of American Can Corp. in New Orleans, another of a man rescued through his roof who had to leave his dog and two cats with no food or water.

Pet lovers throughout the country have joined in a massive effort to organize veterinarians, boats and food to help

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PETS: Aid convoys coordinated via Internet

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save displaced animals. Convoys have been coordinated through message boards at nola.com, petfinder.com and craigslist.org.

And on Friday, authorities in Louisiana who have struggled for nearly two weeks to save human lives in this devastated swampland started making more time for the animals.

The military began providing animal cages and equipment to homeowners who would evacuate only if they could bring their pets with them. "We got the capacity," said Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honore, "and it seemed like the right thing to do."

Many residents had refused to leave New Orleans—much of which remains covered by contaminated water and debris—because they didn't want to abandon their pets. An increasing number of evacuees in recent days have also tried to bring their pets along, officials said.

Jennifer Mullin, spokeswoman for Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, said evacuees "didn't want to leave their animals behind."

"When you think about it, you can't leave a family pet to fend for itself in those kinds of conditions," she said. The dogs and cat taken to Iowa—which "are supposed to be really cute," Mullin said—will be allowed to remain with their owners.

The military's edict on pets answers a petition drive started by Margaret Barry, 64, of Webster, Mass., demanding that an evacuation order include pets. By Friday, she had collected 40,000 signatures.

But all along, rescue workers have worried about abandoned pets.

On Tuesday, a scared and skinny golden Labrador stood on a porch on the edge of the filthy water. A SWAT team from the Chicago area sent to New Orleans to protect city workers got closer. Three more dogs appeared.

"It was not safe to get off the boat," said Mikel Milks, Glencoe director of public safety and a volunteer member of the SWAT team. "With 50 pounds of protective gear, if we fell in, we would drown."

Milks and the team returned the next day when the water had receded by a foot. Conditions were worse, however. Gasoline and oil from motor vehicles were leaking into the water. In addition to human bodies, Milks said he saw dead dogs and cats floating amid the debris.

"We yelled, and there was no answer," Milks said. "And then we saw three Humane Society boats and an animal ambulance from Boston. We yelled to them the address and they rescued all four dogs."

Although the Humane Socie-



Two dogs are rescued from the flooded streets in New Orleans on Friday. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is among the groups providing help.

ty of the United States reported 2,500 animal rescues as of Friday, time is clearly running out, said Wayne Pacelle, the society's president.

"There is quite a drama unfolding," Pacelle said Friday. He had heard of animals being shot and said that while there is an order in St. Bernard Parish to kill any dog maiming or defacing a human corpse, he has heard of local authorities shooting when that is not the case.

"We have room for the dogs. There is no need for it," Pacelle said. "They are scared. They are hungry. But they are alive."

But that will not be the case in a few more days, he said.

Pacelle said it is imperative that all government responders—the Navy, Army, Coast Guard, police, firefighters and others—assist in capturing the animals and bringing them to a shelter.

PAWS, a Chicago rescue group, drove a caravan to the Humane Society in Bauxite, Ark., and returned at 3 a.m. Thursday with 200 homeless pets so the Arkansas shelter would have room for additional animals displaced by the storm.

Pet owners went to great lengths to escape with their animals. Three days after Hurricane Katrina struck, 42-year-old hairdresser Wendy Seibert towed an unusual companion through the flooded alleys of downtown New Orleans, join-

ing hundreds of refugees who trailblazed a backdoor route to the sanctuary of the Superdome.

It was Rusty, her cat, looking dry and comfortably ensconced in a carryall.

"It's like my child," said Seibert, who ranked Rusty as important as the two bottles of water she carried to sustain them as they slowly marched through knee-deep, filthy water.

As incongruous a scene as it was, Seibert wasn't alone at a time when people were dying while waiting to be rescued on the other side of downtown at the city's convention center.

Behind her in the pilgrimage-like line through a flooded wasteland was Dama Fountain, a 45-year-old artist, who was carrying Babette, her 15-year-old cat, also in a small cage. She was joined by her husband, Royce Osborn, 46, a writer and filmmaker.

Many of the animals have not been so lucky. Milks heard from state patrol officers that packs of aggressive dogs roving in the streets are being shot or caught and euthanized.

Tribune staff reporter Ray Quintanilla contributed to this report. Tribune national correspondent Michael Martinez reported from New Orleans; freelance writer Susan Berger reported from Chicago. mjmartinez@tribune.com



Tribune photo by Kuni Takahashi

Venessa MaGee holds her kitten that was evacuated along with MaGee and her boyfriend from a flooded house in New Orleans.

Agencies' pet projects

■ The ASPCA offers help to reunite owners and pets and also seeks volunteers.

■ To volunteer or register your pet, visit www.aspca.org/hurricane. The Humane Society also has volunteer information at www.hsus.org.

■ 2005 ASPCA Disaster Relief Fund
424 East 92nd St.
New York, NY 10128
866-275-3923

■ Humane Society of the United States
HSUS Disaster Relief Fund
HSUS, Dept. DRFHBM
2100 L St., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037
888-259-5431

■ Donate Online to PAWS Chicago/Katrina Pet Rescue Fund
PAWS Chicago
1110 W. 35th St.
Chicago, IL 60609
773-843-4887