

Living Through Hurricane Katrina

- An AFA Member's Account

By Roy Bourgeois, Jr.

On the weekend of August 26th 2005 we received our first warnings of Hurricane Katrina but all of the forecasts predicted that she would hit to our east and we probably wouldn't receive the brunt of the storm. That Saturday was just like any other day in south Louisiana - we went to work, cared for our parrots and babies then started to prepare for some wind and rain that Katrina would give us over the next couple of days.

In the 1970's and '80's we had owned a number of pet parrots and always had a dream of having an aviary where we could breed and raise parrots domestically so that the public could acquire parrots that weren't taken from the jungles from which they were born. This was our dream and soon became our family passion. Then, in the early '80's, our family was hit with a curveball. My father's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Anyone who has ever been confronted with this disease knows that it's a family tragedy. It became a 24 hour a day and 7 day a week job. This disease makes you put everything in your life on the back-burner. We were able to keep a few of our parrots but our dream of our aviary was gone. After 15 years of this disease my grandmother passed away at 93 years of age. After a few months of not knowing what to do with ourselves, our dream again came to the surface. By this time, importation of parrots had stopped and we purchased our first pair of breeding parrots. Being a middle class family,

our finances were limited and we would have to start slowly. Years went by and our expenses far exceeded our profits, but the love of parrots made it all worthwhile. This has always been my advice to anyone - don't get involved with breeding any animal if you intend to make a profit, because it just doesn't happen. Your love and enjoyment of parrots will be the only thing that keeps you happy.

We made many friends in the avian community, but in 1999 we met the most wonderful lady and we would soon learn that she would change our lives and make our dreams come true. Pauline Bezette was one of the nicest people I had ever met in an online community. She had recently moved to Alaska and has learned that breeding parrots in Alaska is one of the hardest things to accomplish. She told me one evening that she was going to send me a couple of parrots, and that within a couple of years she would give me almost 40 pairs of parrots. She sent us everything from cockatoos to conures and included all the cages and breeding equipment that anyone could wish for. We truly believe that this was our blessing from God and we did everything to make these parrots our beloved family members. The work was intensive, but the joy of caring for these lovely creatures was our passion.

Then, in January of 2000, our family was again hit with illness. My other grandmother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis years earlier and her husband was diagnosed with dementia right after the holidays. We thought it best for my grandmother to live with my mother and for my mother's step-sister to take her father in her home to care for him. Again, we were faced with another life altering illness in our family, but we stuck to our dream of breeding our parrots. Caring for an M.S. patient is very hard, and you must have all necessary equipment to make it possible to do everyday things such as using the restroom, bathing and getting from one chair to another. It's was a hard way of life, but we did it with the support of our entire family.

On Sunday morning, August 28, 2005, we awoke to Katrina, which had grown into one of the most intense hurricanes that this country had ever seen. It was now a category 5 hurricane that had its eye set for the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi. Since we lived in St. Bernard parish in southern Louisiana, hurricanes were nothing new to us, but a storm this strong wasn't seen very often. We decided to try to evacuate, but we had no luck getting accommodations in any hotel for hundreds of miles. Traveling with my grandmother was a very hard thing to do, as she was unable to sit up for any amount of time, so leaving with no place to go was out of the question. At 12 noon my sister and her family decided it would be best for them to evacuate, since her daughter is 11 years old. With much sadness, we decided it was best for them to leave and that we would be fine since we had everything we needed at home. When they left we started to secure all the parrots and our home. We provided the parrots with a place to get away from the wind and rain, and put all of them in one of our indoor aviaries. It took hours to secure all the aviaries and our homes. We were together with two friends, and one of their mothers. Tired from all the physical work, we

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decided to all stay at my mother's home and hunker down for the storm.

Soon after 12 midnight, Katrina started to come ashore. At first, the hurricane gave us strong rain and some gusty winds. Within a couple of hours, we were without power and had to rely on my sister calling us to let us know the progress of the storm. By the following daybreak, the storm started to close in on us, and we were seeing things flying in all directions. The winds were now over 100 mph, and anything that wasn't tied down was flying in the air. It's an incredible sight to see the power of nature and how small we are in comparison to her fury. We watched our neighbors' homes being torn apart. Fences were like sails and they went first, then patio covers were torn to shreds, trees were being shredded and limbs were flying everywhere. At about 8 am my brother in law phoned and told us that the storm was right on us and it was then that we realized that we had big problems. The winds were now blowing 130 mph and gusting to over 150 mph. Roofs were being torn off with ease and the roofs that did stay on the homes were voided of their shingles. They flew through the air like Frisbees. We huddled in the front entrance of my parent's home and couldn't believe that after years of near misses with hurricanes, we had finally gotten our turn. We kept telling each other that within an hour or so the worse would be over and we could relax. Wrong!

At about 9 a.m. we looked out of the front door and noticed that a canal on the next street was spilling over its banks. We then turned to relay this message to everyone else in the house and when we looked back at the front door, the storm surge was at our front door. We kept telling each other that it was going to stop, but within 3 minutes we had over 3 feet of water in our home. Knowing the water was still coming, I pulled the attic stairs down and threw a hatchet into the attic. I instructed my mom to grab the baby birds and my friend's mother and get everyone into the attic. I ran into the living room and placed my dogs on the sofa and then my friend and I lifted my grandmother into the attic. We couldn't believe how light my grandmother felt and how easily we got her into the attic. People have told me that it was adrenaline, but I know God's hand was in motion. We then got all the dogs into the attic. By this time, the water was about 5 feet high in the house and we remembered my parents' cat. My friend swam to the master bedroom and found the cat on the shower curtain pole. He took the cat and held her above the water and made his way into the attic. When everyone was in the attic I remembered that my mom's Green-winged Macaw "Jackamoo" was still in his cage, so I made my way through the floating furniture to his

cage where I saw him hanging from the top of the cage only inches from the surface of the water. I took him into the attic and sat there in disbelief about what had just happened.

Then something hit me...all the parrots in the aviaries. Looking down through the attic doors I knew we couldn't make it without endangering someone's life. The water was inches from the ceiling and still rising. Concerned that the water was still rising, we began to cut a hole in the roof to escape in case the water got too high in the attic. Once we were able to get out onto the roof, we walked immediately to the aviaries and see if we could get into the aviaries to let the parrots out so they could escape. To our shock, all of the aviaries were completely under water and we could hear no sounds from any of our parrots. The most upsetting feeling came over all of us. We felt guilty that we didn't have enough time to get to them. We looked back into the hole that we had cut in the roof, and to our disbelief the water was coming into the attic. We thought to ourselves, "At least we were able to save a handful."

We waited in the attic for over two hours, watching the water rise inch by inch until we could see flares shooting into the air and hear the sound of motor

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boats in the area. Luckily, we were able to flag one of the boats down. My only concern was getting my family and friends out of the attic. We were able to get everyone out of the attic onto the boat and my friend and I decided to stay behind to wait for another boat that would allow us to take our pets. Upon seeing our family pull away from the house, I saw the front of the boat fly into the air, and I saw my mother throw herself over my grandmother to stop her from going overboard. I later learned that the person driving the boat hit a telephone pole and that he had been drinking the night before.

An hour later, another boat pulled up to the house and we saw 2 firemen stick their heads into the attic hole to see if anyone was still in the attic. By this time, we were sitting in about a foot of water in the attic. We asked if we could take our pets, and they said, "Sure." They loaded us into a boat and we then went to rescue other people out of their homes. After the boat was full, we were taken to a shelter where there were over 500 people with no food, water or restrooms. Once we arrived there, we started to look for the rest of our family. We searched and searched, but could not find them. The thought came to me that maybe the boat had run into problems and that something bad had happened. The feeling of helplessness was unbelievable, and the thought of losing my family was frighteningly real.

I don't think anyone in the shelter slept that night. Helicopters flew overhead shining lights into the building and more and more people entered with looks of disbelief. We heard stories of people losing children, wives, husbands and family pets. I remember looking at others saying, "This can't be really happening." The next morning, everyone sat in the shelter and watched the sun come up. It was a welcome sight because we were told that in the morning the boats would come and we would be lifted by helicopter to Baton Rouge, which is about 100 miles from New Orleans.

But we were not going anywhere until our family was reunited. Within an hour, I saw my father come into the shelter. He told us that they were taken to a friend's 3-story home, where they stayed the night. He told the story of people who were in the home that wanted to go to the shelter, but didn't want to go because they had heard that no pets were allowed. Then one of the firemen on the boat told them that they could take their pets because there was even a guy over at the shelter with a red bird. My mom and dad knew it was us, and that we were okay. I went back to the house with my dad to bring my grandmother her medications and to see that they

were all okay. After making sure they were settled in the home I returned to the shelter. I told them that we were told the boats and helicopters were coming to get all of us in the area and we would meet wherever we would be evacuated to. They had 5 parrotlets with them and they didn't have anything to feed the babies, so my friend's mother crushed corn flakes with raisins and water. She tried to make them eat as much food as possible, which proved to be very difficult but did sustain 3 of them.

Soon we knew that we had another problem: hungry baby parrots with nothing to feed them. I had read articles of people who made their hand feeding formula from dog food. That was something we had. We crushed the dog food up into small pieces and soaked it in water until soft. We tried to feed the babies with a plastic cup. These were not the most graceful feedings in the world, but we were able to get the food into the babies and they did seem content. We did this for days, but I knew that if I didn't get some better hand feeding formula, the babies would get weaker and weaker. Our Green-winged Macaw didn't have a problem with eating dog food - in fact, he rather liked it! I thank Dr. Gregory Rich every day for talking me into converting all my parrots to a pelleted diet. If I hadn't, I know we would have lost our Jackamoo!

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Over the next three days, we waited for help that never came. On the morning of the fourth day, we were told that if we could walk to the river (in 4 feet of water), trucks would bus us a mile away to the ferry landing where we would be boated to Baton Rouge. We did that, but the boats to take us to Baton Rouge never came. Instead, we were boated to the city of Algiers, which is across the river from New Orleans. There, we saw the city that we had grown up in totally destroyed and totally in darkness. It resembled pictures of Saigon that I had seen in movies.

I was able to use a pay telephone at the ferry landing to call my aunt in New Hampshire collect (since we didn't have a nickel on us). I asked her to get in touch with my sister and tell her that we were all okay, and that we were leaving on a bus from the landing, but I didn't know where we were being taken, nor did I know where the rest of our family and friends were being taken.

On the ferry ride to Algiers point, a yellow parakeet flew onto the deck of the ferry. The poor little guy struggled and struggled to make it to us and after a few tries he finally made it. We took him with us in the cage with all the other babies and decided he was going with us. We didn't have any feed at all with us but at least he would have a chance.

We sat at the ferry landing in Baton Rouge for almost 14 hours until we were able to board a school bus, which took us to the Louisiana State University campus. Once we arrived there, arguments started on the busses and the officials there told us that they were only a triage center and that they were not taking in any evacuees. With all of the fighting going on in the busses, we made the decision to not get on the bus. Then the officials told us that they wanted us out of there and that if we didn't get onto the busses, they would start shooting us with bean bag guns. So we decided to take refuge under a large tree about a half a block away, where we waited until someone could come and get us. Then a fellow came by and told me that he could take the baby parrots to the LSU Veterinarian School, where they would be taken care of. I was so happy for this because I knew they were slowly getting weaker. The time was about 4 a.m. and an officer saw us under the tree with all the dogs. He stopped, gave us some clothes, and fed us the equivalent of a Thanksgiving meal. It was the first time we had eaten in almost 4 days. We ate and slept under the tree until sunrise.

The next morning, a wonderful girl picked us up on the side of the street and took us to her family's home. Her mother and entire family were so gracious to us! They were our lifeline; without them I really don't know where we would be. When you see the news and read all the terrible things about people, it's heartwarming to know that there are still people like the Patin family in the world. They put us up in a hotel since their home was filled with family members who had stayed at their home during the storm.

Then the waiting continued. For 2 more days, I didn't hear from my family that was still in the friend's home back in St. Bernard parish. My sister traveled to Houston, where most of the evacuees were taken, and searched for them to no avail. We waited and waited! Then on Saturday night, I got a phone call from my sister telling me that my mom was in the hospital in Houston, and that my grandmother was taken out of the house, but that she later passed away. My mother was grief-stricken, as was the entire family, to think that for days they asked rescuers to take my grandmother out of the house but no one ever returned for them. They were forgotten! By the time she was finally rescued, my grandmother had developed congestive heart failure and by the time she was seen by medics she was near death. My mother was told to stay with her for the last few minutes of her life. After a couple of minutes my grandmother passed away.

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My mother was in the hospital because she had developed an abscess on her foot from the dirty water. The medics told her that it could be serious and transported her to a hospital. Again, she was separated from my father. He was giving the officials information about my grandmother. When he went to look for my mother, she was gone. Later, we learned that she was lifted out by a helicopter to the Louis Armstrong International Airport. She was later taken by plane to Houston for treatment on her foot. It was very serious, but they stabilized her and released her the following day. My sister drove down to the hospital and picked her up and then we waited to hear from my father and my friend's mother.

The next day we got a call from Austin, Texas, where my father had been evacuated along with my friend's mother. They were bussed out of St. Bernard parish, where they were told that they weren't allowed to take the parrotlet babies with them. They had found a gift bag and put the babies in it with some shredded paper. The bag was very small, so they were angered that the officials wouldn't let them take the babies. They told the officials that the babies would die if they were not allowed to go with them, but the officials really didn't care. Once they boarded the bus, a knock came at the window and another official handed them the bag of babies. They were so grateful, but they were still angered that a small bag of living babies were not going to be allowed on the bus. Why? What would it hurt?

My sister made her way to Austin to get my father. Once she arrived, she didn't even recognize him, for he had a full beard and hadn't bathed in almost 5 days. She picked them up there and returned to Houston, where they would finally be reunited with my mother. Within a few days, they drove down to New Roads, Louisiana, where I was able to find a small mobile home for rent. The owners of the mobile home were very helpful and made it possible for us to rent it with very little money.

A week later I received a call from 911 Parrot Alert. They were able to make it to my home and rescue 3 of my 12 macaws. The nest boxes were on hooks and when the water levels rose, the boxes floated off and the birds were able to escape onto the tops of the cages. Since I knew that all of my breeding cages were suspended 3 feet off of the ground, we were able to calculate that the water had reached 14 feet in the area. It's simply a miracle that any of them made it out alive. This was the best news for all of us - we were overjoyed!

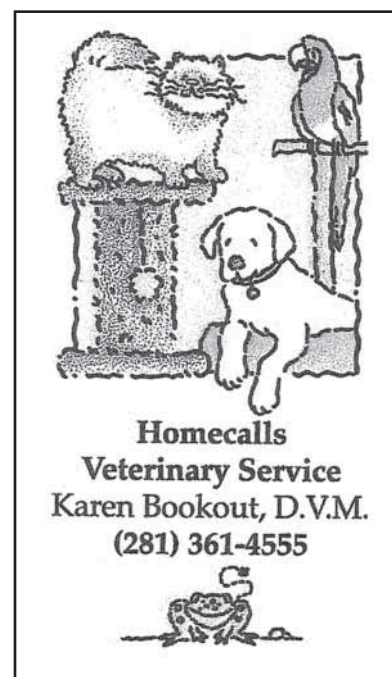
To date (November 15, 2005), we are still living in our little mobile home. There are 9 of us, and only one bathroom. We still haven't been able to put my grandmother to rest because the state has held her body for over 10 weeks. We find this unacceptable, but as we have learned, the federal and local governments are in charge and we have no voice about anything. We are still waiting to hear from our insurance companies about our coverage on our destroyed homes, but have been told that since we didn't have flood insurance we would receive no compensation for our homes.

So here we stay with no idea about our future, no idea what our next move will be. It's a very hard way to live, but when you have no control, you have to accept the way things are, like it or not.

If anyone reading this says that this could never happen to them, I would beg to differ. Before Hurricane Katrina we all had homes, cars, a great aviary and a very normal life. Now we have nothing. It can happen to you!

Things we have learned:

- When you live in a hurricane area, always have an evacuation plan.
- Days before the scheduled arrival of the hurricane, book hotel rooms away from the coast that you can evacuate to. Hotel rooms tends to book quickly and early, so don't make the mistake we made.



- Maybe also schedule a U-haul truck. We would have been able to load all the parrots in crates into it for evacuation.
- If you have a handicapped family member, make plans with a local ambulance company to take the person to a hospital on higher ground.
- If you have no option other than to stay, make sure that you have ample food, water, medication, and clothing in a dry box. Place these things in your attic, because you could be there for days without any help.
- Have enough food for your pets and have plenty of transporting crates for all your animals.
- Put a flare gun and hatchet in the attic to cut your way through the roof if necessary. Many people died because of not having a way to get through the roof. These are just a few things that we can think of; consult your local officials for more information. Finally, I would like to thank everyone that helped us:

- Keith and Bridget Patin
- Marshal, Jenny and Samantha Speights
- 911 Parrot Alert
- Mattie Sue Athan
- Terry and Loretta Perez

- Daniel Kopulos
- Matt Schmit
- Pauline Bezette
- The Olinde Family (we love our new home)
- The residents and officials of Baton Rouge and New Roads, Louisiana
- The American Federation of Aviculture for all the cages

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