

The HSUS's Lloyd Brown carries a cat recovered from the rubble of a Tuscaloosa, Ala., tornado, one of more than 2,000 animals helped by The HSUS in disaster situations last year.



INTO THE DISASTER ZONE

The HSUS's Animal Rescue Team heads on a mission of recovery and relief

by MICHAEL SHARP

Jennifer Potter awoke early to the news: The water was coming. It was 6:30 a.m. on the last Saturday of August, and Hurricane Irene was shoving its way across North Carolina's central coastline. As the yard began to flood, Potter raced around her Pamlico County home, picking things off the floor and stacking them on bookcases, counters, and tables.

"It just kept rising up," she says. "It started coming up on the porch, and then it came in real fast. ... I just couldn't pick up things fast enough." The furniture started floating. The refrigerator turned over. Her Labrador-beagle mixes, Finn and Pebbles, sought higher ground on top of furniture. Eventually, Potter grabbed her cats, Morgan and Cross, and set them down safely on a king-sized mattress floating in a bedroom.

In another room, she and her husband climbed onto the top bunk with their 3-year-old son, riding out the storm as flood waters swelled 3½ to 4 feet inside their home. "It's just so devastating," she would say later. "We lost everything."

In the days after Irene, as the Potters stayed with relatives, returning home only to sift through the damage, they could at least take some comfort in this: All four pets were safe in a temporary shelter run by The HSUS at a neighborly county's fairgrounds.

"With raw sewage in the house, and as much water that came up, they don't have a dry place to sleep in there," Potter says. "And ... I just thought this would be the best decision because they'd be fed, taken care of ... until I can get back to them."

Helping Animals, Helping People

Chris Schindler (left) and Adam Parascandola carry Labrador-beagle mixes Finn and Pebbles in Pamlico County, N.C. The Potter family needed a temporary shelter for the dogs after Hurricane Irene. "At least until I can get back in a house and get my animals back," Jennifer Potter says. "So, I'm relieved."

Sunday, Aug. 28 »»

The desperation in Pamlico County was not lost on Chris Schindler, HSUS manager of animal fighting investigations. As Irene blew across North Carolina, he and two colleagues had spent two sleepless nights hunkered down with 27 dogs rescued from a nearby dogfighting operation.

To keep the shelter's bay doors from blowing open, they'd crafted a makeshift contraption out of extra leashes. And they'd kept watch on both the flood waters creeping down the street and the roof at the back corner of the building, which was beginning to separate from the wall. "It was almost like the wall was breathing," Schindler remembers, noting it would bow out in a gust of wind, then slam back.

It was that mission to protect the seized dogs that put Schindler and deputy manager Janette Reeve in prime position to shift their efforts immediately to disaster response. As the sun finally returned Sunday, they joined Hill in assessing the aftermath, an outing that led to a fortuitous meeting with a chestnut-colored horse named Lightning.

Residents would later recount seeing the horse swimming down the road during the hurricane, and on this afternoon, the team found him strolling along the street. Using a leash and Hill's belt, they designed a halter and walked him two miles home.

There, Schindler stood on a cluttered front porch and faced his next challenge: figuring out where the heck that scratching sound was coming from. The home of Lightning's owners had been engulfed in flood waters the day before, and Schindler wondered if someone was trying desperately to get his attention—until he pinpointed the source of the noise. On the side porch, among piles of furniture, a door lay on its side, up against the house. And on the



Running the shelter was just one undertaking of the HSUS Animal Rescue Team in the wake of Irene. Joining forces with Pamlico County animal control officer Berkley Hill, responders also retrieved animals left behind by fleeing families and distributed free food and fresh water to the pets of those who stayed.

Hill—whose own home was severely damaged by the flooding—would later say he'd seen photos from Hurricane Katrina but could still never imagine such devastation, until now. The daily drives, crisscrossing the county, provided a sobering view. Piles of waterlogged possessions dotted front yard after front yard—couches, dressers, televisions, fans, everything. A steeple lay in the grass alongside one church, and the marquee of another read: "Count Your Blessings, Not Your Troubles." Cars were parked with their hoods up, in an effort to dry out the engines.

In the past, residents with nowhere to take their pets would call Hill's office. "[When] people are displaced, a lot of times the animals are not thought about until the

last minute," says Hill. Now, instead of turning them away, he'd reached out to The HSUS. "It's like a dramatic change for our county. I mean, it's really something that I think is going to help set a new standard for the county and level of care for the animals."

Amidst the ruins, the Animal Rescue Team offered a reassuring hand while working to keep the county's pets safe, a service they provided again and again as natural disasters struck in 2011. They're the men and women who braved deep flood waters to rescue cats off Mississippi rooftops, who worked day and night to catch pets stranded in the heartbreaking rubble of tornado-ravaged Alabama—their life-saving efforts a critical service to communities on the mend. "You realize that connection that people have to their pets—it's the only thing sometimes they have left that gives them any semblance of normalcy," says Sára Varsa, the team's director of operations.

"And I think it's a basic component of their healing."

door's narrow edge, balancing paws like a tightrope walker, was a red hound.

She'd been stranded up there for more than 36 hours.

"When I was able to get over to her, she practically leapt into my arms—and was like, thank God somebody came here," Schindler says. "And then when I put her on the ground, the first thing she did was run over and roll in the grass, and roll, and roll, and roll around. I mean, she was so happy."

Monday and Tuesday, Aug. 29 and 30 >>

In their meticulous search for pets and owners in need, it is not uncommon for responders to uncover cases of cruelty and neglect as well. North Carolina was no exception: Two days after Irene hit, the team helped Hill rescue 11 emaciated and dehydrated hounds from a backyard pen where they'd been left to survive the flooding.

"I'm in shock and awe at some of the stuff that we have found," Hill later lamented. "Some of it makes me very angry and sick to my stomach when I see it."

The next morning began in a parking lot behind the courthouse, responders standing over a map of coastal Carolina unfolded across the hood of a truck. The Animal Rescue Team, whose presence had grown to five members, joined Hill in breaking down the day's priorities.

It didn't take long to check the first item off the list: tracking down a pair of exuberant husky mixes, loose since the storm. One dog happily ran up to rescuers in the parking lot of a nearby school. Quickly but gently, senior field responder Rowdy Shaw lobbed a slip lead around the other, more elusive dog, who promptly rolled onto his back and extended his legs into the air, as if raising a white flag.

From there, the group traveled to a vacated home at the end of a dirt road; the owners had called to say they'd left their pets behind. Outside, responders poured food and fresh water for two black Lab mixes hanging close to the front porch. Inside, they tracked down the family parrot, caged in a bathroom. Reeve used a towel to bundle him up and lift him into a travel cage. In one bedroom, Shaw discovered a turtle in an aquarium; if he'd been left with food and water, it was now gone.

All four animals were loaded onto Hill's truck, bound for the temporary shelter, the parrot riding shotgun. "Every time I stopped somewhere, he would go, 'Leaving?'" Hill says. "And every time I'd come back to the truck, he would say, 'Hello.' ... We carried on conversations all the way."

Wednesday, Aug. 31 >>

Twenty-nine years before Irene pounded Nelson Lee's property, the Goose Creek Island resident walked outside to feed his family's new horse. No one, not even the man who'd sold her, had realized she was pregnant—so one can imagine Lee's shock when he entered his barn to find a foal standing alongside her. Fittingly, the colt was named Surprise.

Last August, Surprise stood in that same barn, ready to live up to his name once again. As 54 inches of water swelled around the horse, Lee stood helpless in his house, fearing the worst. "I told my wife, 'I've got to get out there. I know he's drowning. I just know he's drowning.'"

At 6 p.m. that Saturday, he finally got to his friend. "He wasn't [panicking] or nothing," Lee says, adding with a laugh: "He was ready for me to feed him."

Here, There, and Everywhere

In the wake of Hurricane Irene, HSUS efforts included rounding up loose hounds, rescuing a parrot left behind in the evacuation, and bringing fresh water to Lightning the horse. One morning, the team distributed 230 bags of free pet food in just 2½ hours. "I had a couple people actually crying because they were out of food for themselves," says The HSUS's Perry Stone, "but they were more concerned about feeding their animals."



It's returning those animals back to the people who have lost everything else that really makes what we do worthwhile.

— ROWDY SHAW

side of the trailer home. Stepping carefully across the roof, Shaw snuck up on the cat, but she slipped underneath his net and took off running, leaping into the water. Fortunately, they'd planned for this, and Loller was right there, in the boat, to scoop her up to safety.

Alternating roles—one climbing porch rails and roofs, the other providing backup in the boat—they brought six cats back with them that day. "That was definitely one of the coolest rescue days," Loller says, "just because you knew that if we didn't get them, they were surely going to die."

One of those cats was Ally, rescued from a neighbor's roof. Richard and his wife, Dorothy, had known she was at least alive, having sent food with Tunica Humane Society president Debbie Pegram, who boated into their neighborhood. But still, they worried. Dorothy was convinced no one would be able to catch her, and she feared Ally might eventually starve.

Then they got the call: Ally was safe.

"We were glad," Richard says with a chuckle. "We worried about her. I mean, she was our cat and we took care of her for four or five years."

As he spoke, in early October, Ally lay curled up on a front-porch chair. The Osborns had just moved into their new home, now 14 feet off the ground, and Ally was fast asleep, home again—exactly the outcome the Animal Rescue Team strives for. "It's returning those animals back to the people who have lost everything else," Shaw says, "that really makes what we do worthwhile." ■

▶ [VIEW A SLIDESHOW](#) with more disaster response images at humanesociety.org/allanimals.

Come Hell or High Water

Field responders Rowdy Shaw and Tara Loller spent a day boating through deep flood waters in Tunica, Miss., rescuing cats off rooftops. "They were just so professional in what they did, just highly trained," says Sandy Williams of the Tunica Humane Society. "... They came here to do a job, and they did it. And what they weren't able to retrieve, they taught us how to retrieve."

On Wednesday, with the area under a boil-water advisory, team members backed down Lee's driveway and unloaded six-pack after six-pack of canned drinking water for Surprise. The delivery came amid continued outreach across the county, responders knocking on doors and distributing bags of dog and cat food donated by PetSmart Charities.

They also dropped off fliers about the temporary shelter, where nearly 75 animals would eventually pass through. All would receive veterinary examinations and, when needed, free vaccinations, heartworm tests, and parasite treatment.

The Ross family arrived Thursday to visit Tiny the rabbit, Milo and Flower the cats, and Sweet Pea the pug. They had handed the animals off to responders two days earlier as they prepared to camp out for the night, their home ruined. "They came in in tears," says volunteer Amy Bogart. "[The wife] left saying, 'I feel good now. I can tell you guys are taking great care of our animals. I was really worried; now I'm not worried.'"

The team spent another week in

Pamlico County before wrapping up operations. As the emergency shelter wound down in early October, The HSUS had joined other agencies in helping more than 2,000 animals in disaster situations over the course of 2011.

For Shaw, the most memorable of those rescues had occurred three months earlier and halfway across the country, as he fought to save cats stranded between water and sky.

Flashback: Spring 2011 >>

Richard Osborn tried desperately to get Ally into a carrier, but the terrified cat scratched and bit at him. "She wasn't going in that cage," he remembers. "She, like, ate my arms up. ... I did the best I could, and so I had to let her go. And then I couldn't catch her."

With the Mississippi River threatening to overflow nearby Tunica Cutoff Lake, officials were preparing to lock down the Osborns' Mississippi community. Eventually, the family had no choice: They just had to go. They had to leave Ally behind.

Turns out, they weren't the only ones, and in early May, the Tunica Humane Society requested The HSUS's help in retrieving several loose cats from the flooded neighborhood. That's how Shaw ended up in a fire department boat, navigating double-digit-deep flood waters, preparing to chase cats across rooftops.

After spotting one hiding under an overhang, Shaw and fellow HSUS responder Tara Loller backed the boat up to the far

READY, SET, EVACUATE

« Animal disaster planning undergoes a revolution

For so long, the message had been simply this: If you're forced to evacuate your home, leave your pets in the bathroom with enough food and water to last three days.

"That's what I grew up thinking," says Laura Bevan, HSUS Southern region director. "You know, the magical bathroom."

But in August 1992, Hurricane Andrew quickly changed that thinking.

Bevan remembers one man who kept returning to look for his cats after his South Florida community was leveled. "He said, 'They told us if we put our animals in the bathroom, they'd be safe. And when I come back, there's not a house; there's not a bathroom; there's nothing.'"

Today, Hurricane Andrew still stands as a watershed moment. It was the first time The HSUS set up a temporary pet shelter in the wake of a disaster, and it inspired new messaging to encourage the state's residents to take their pets when they evacuate. It also spotlighted holes in government response plans and helped lead to the creation of a statewide volunteer animal response network.

In 2005, another epic disaster elevated these issues to a national level: When the New Orleans levees gave way to the floods wrought by Hurricane Katrina, a heartbroken country watched as people clung to rooftops and floating refrigerators alongside their pets, waving desperately for help. As relief agencies became overwhelmed, so too did animal protection organizations struggling to save pets left behind, many by families forced to evacuate without them.

In the end, more than 10,000 animals came through emergency shelters set up by The HSUS, the Louisiana SPCA, and scores of other groups and advocates. The massive effort brought unprecedented attention to the human-animal bond and launched an HSUS capacity-building effort that now enables the Animal Rescue Team to help animals in distress at a moment's notice.

"I think Katrina was really a tipping point, in terms of highlighting the needs of animals in disasters and showing that the animal needs affect the people," says Betsy McFarland, HSUS vice president for companion animals. She remembers taking calls from flood victims stuck on their rooftops, wondering if the helicopters overhead would allow their dogs on board too.

A year later, the HSUS-backed Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act addressed the dangers posed by a dearth of pet-friendly evacuation services and shelters. The law mandated that state and local agencies include pet owners in disaster plans in order to receive federal funds.

Since then, many more doors have been opened to animals. Joanne Bourbeau, HSUS Northeastern region director, tells the story of a couple at a Red Cross shelter after Hurricane Irene. They'd brought their cat, but as they told a National Guard member, they weren't able to grab their pet rat before evacuating.

"The next morning, she woke up," Bourbeau says, "and her rat was in his little cage next to her cot."

Personal preparation is now top of mind as well. As Hurricane Irene bore down, the Weather Channel welcomed HSUS Georgia state director Jessica DuBois to its Atlanta studios for two live interviews. "The No. 1 thing I wanted to convey was to plan and to prepare and always take your pets with you," DuBois says. "Because if it's not safe for you, it's not safe for your pets."

A day later, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie addressed a press conference as Irene set her sights on his state.

"Certainly, if you're traveling to be with a relative or a friend or a coworker," he said, "bring your pets with you."

It was a far cry from: Leave them in the bathroom with three days of food.

➤ **TO LEARN** how to make a disaster plan for your pets, go to humansociety.org/disastertips.



Dogs swimming streetside and pets stranded on rooftops were a common sight during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The devastating storm set in motion a revolution in animal disaster planning.