

Clearing the coast

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We pulled off Interstate 20 at Meridian, Miss., just before midnight with two tasks in mind: buy last-minute supplies before they sold out, and find a hotel room to crash in for a few hours before driving into the storm zone.

My friend Amber and I—both Hurricane Katrina animal rescue veterans—had begged off work for a few days and thrown clothes, food and gear in duffel bags. We lit out on the morning of Labor Day, a few hours after Hurricane Gustav arrived in Louisiana.

Twelve hours and about 700 miles later, we found most of the items requested by the crew we were joining the next morning at a 24-hour Wal-Mart. Then, after being turned away at several hotels, we snagged the last room at a Microtel and unloaded bags in the parking lot.

Amid stilled convoys of out-of-state power company trucks headed in and minivans piled high with the belongings of evacuees headed out, we were greeted by vociferous barking. A beagle chained to a bumper was making as much noise as he could manage, guarding his family's turf. In the SUV next to him, two tiny toy breed dogs ricocheted off the closed windows and dashboard, yipping. A short distance away, other dogs, unseen, joined the uproar.

We looked at each other in dismay. We kicked into rescue mode, reaching for water bowls and food, wondering aloud whether to alert authorities, and if so, who.

And then it hit us: They were safe. Unlike the tens of thousands of beloved companion animals for whom Katrina brought temporary or permanent separation from their humans, and for too many, death by

drowning or starvation, these dogs were with their families, riding out the storm unharmed. Though they weren't welcome in the hotel, the temperature outside was cool enough, they were secured and had shelter in or under vehicles. On closer inspection, they had food and water. It wasn't ideal, but it wasn't dangerous. We handed out treats and went to bed.

Over the next few days, we camped in a rural Louisiana barn without power or running water, caring for 200 homeless dogs and cats evacuated from two New Orleans animal shelters. We walked dogs and cleaned cat litter boxes around the clock. We fed and watered, then repeated the routine almost as soon as we finished. We cuddled puppies in need of medical care that wasn't immediately available and comforted dogs confined to crates. It was hot, buggy, tiring work, but compared to pulling abandoned, starved and injured pets out of locked houses or off the streets for weeks on end, it was an easy assignment. A few days later, the animals went back to their shelters.

In 2005, pets paid a high price for being left behind in a hurricane, but judging by the provisions made for them this time, which included improvised shelters in hotel parking lots and formal emergency shelters where human evacuees could bring their furry companions, we are making progress in caring for owned animals during disasters. Next project: Find better ways to provide for the homeless ones.

To read more about Hurricane Gustav animal rescue efforts, see www.bayourescue.typepad.com