

10-6-17 The Long Journey to Disaster Recovery and Rescue

The recent hurricanes are leaving such a wide swath of destruction, it is difficult to comprehend unless we have experienced it or are in contact with someone who is experiencing it. This is in the present tense, as the effects continue long after the hurricane has left.

Along with emergency responders, utility crews, food and medical shipments and heavy equipment to move the wreckage, there are the registered sanitarians trying to devise safe ways to have water, food and safely dispose of the ongoing sewage needs. Ordinarily, we try to treat the sewage before it meets with groundwater but in emergencies, it is enough to return to the ancient methods of pits and trenches, layered with straw and lime and sufficient distance to water, food and shelter.

The floods have ripped through and surfaced existing septic systems. The flood waters are filled with dead animals, dead people, decaying vegetation and numerous chemicals from flooded businesses. As the water recedes, they leave behind chemical, bacterial, viral and parasitic contaminants. The need for sanitation becomes critical. Ordinary soap and water, dry air and sunlight go a long way, if they can be had. Gloves and masks are needed during the decontamination stage to avoid infections.

While you might think that bleach or hydrogen peroxide might be necessary, they must be used with knowledge and caution. There are many calls to poison control centers and visits to emergency rooms due to inhalation of fumes from improper use of these products. The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) recommends soaps and detergents first, and pine oil disinfectants second before resorting to the use of bleach.

While all this mess is happening to people, the lives of animals have also been disturbed and distressed. A pet might be recognized as such and be rescued, but what is an injured wild animal supposed to do? I met one last Saturday at Long Beach in Plymouth. I planned on going for a walk. That never happened. The parking lot was filled with sight seers, there to look at the waves. There was still frequent splash over, many still delivering sand and seaweed. As I began to turn left into the parking area, I stopped my car, for there was a cormorant. I see them all the time in the water and on the rocks drying their wings. I have never seen one hanging out in a parking lot.

As I watched, it became clear that it was afraid and injured. It tried to run but did so with a limp. It tried to jump to the top of the low concrete wall but did not have the strength or ability to make it and would fall back again. I imagined walking up to it, grabbing it and tossing it back to the ocean. Was that the right thing to do? I needed advice!

Looking for a wild animal rescue agency brought me to one in Weymouth but they were closed. Wild Care in Eastham was open and said they could take it. They recommended swaddling it in a towel or blanket and suggested putting it in a box. I got out to get a closer look and others came to my aid. One man offered a towel. It really wasn't large enough but it would have to do. Another man got off his motorcycle to assist me.

I now know that cormorants have a very pointy sharp beak. As I approached with my “swaddling towel”, it vigorously hissed at me and then attempted to run away. Doing a left-right-left dance, to take it by surprise, I tossed the towel over him/her, after receiving a good welt and scrape on my right wrist from its very capable beak. (another casualty after natural disasters: animal bites). The motorcycle man with a “twenty-thousand-dollar leg that isn’t supposed to get wet” was right there with me, seaweed waves crashing over us, and took the wrapped bird while I adjusted stuff in the back of my car, creating a wall between me and it, or, so I hoped; as I did not have that box. The bird was in and I shook hands with my helpers to say thank you.

I sat there for a couple minutes wondering if I could or even should do this. Would the bird remain quiet? Would it decide it needed to escape, while I was driving to Eastham? The bird was quiet and so off I went.

Only once during the long drive did it pop its snake-like head up, as if to say, “Why did you change the radio station? I liked that music!”

My bird made it. Its species identification is DCCO for Double Crested Cormorant and its number is 1492. The rescue ladies chuckled as they wrote the number, reciting “In 14 hundred 92 Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”

The oceans are not always blue. Sometimes they are dark with treachery to humans and animals alike. This young cormorant appeared to have a concussion from being crashed into rocks and tossed over the wall, along with some survivable injuries. As I left, it had perched on a little rock and was doing that drying-out-the-wings-thing that they do, while warming under a heat lamp. My hurricane casualty bird was in good hands.

I was ordered to never transport a wild animal in the back of my car again, as it was “frickin’ dangerous!” I won’t. But it was worth it this time.

Update from Wild Care: DCCO 1492 is “doing well, done with his antibiotics, past the critical stage, eating fish and romping in the clinic. He is a cute, joyful, little patient of ours.”

For some, the recovery journey is a short one. Thank you, Wild Care!

<https://www.wildcarecapecod.org/animal-help-line/>

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