

WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR LOCAL WILD LIFE IN THE HURRICANE ?

By Larry Eichert 9/17

Usually wildlife seeks safety before a storm and may move many miles from our habitats. Because the hurricane hit inland and a portion of the coast we may notice the disappearance of some of our local species for a period of time. Individuals of some species may have died or were injured. This would have been especially true for young birds that were unable to fly and young squirrels, trapped in nests or having fallen out of the nests.

At the same time other species win. Orchids depend on the strong winds to spread their seeds. Increased areas of standing water also benefit mosquitoes, love bugs certain species of frogs such as the gopher frogs and spadefoot toad which use the heavy rain fall to breed. Some ground birds benefit from the excess ground cover left behind by fallen trees and brush to form new nests. Yet another survivor would be the raccoons who find new sources of food, since they are scavengers, due to the excess trash we as humans throw away.

Most species of animals and plants however are in a win-lose situation. Two examples would be, burrowing animals. (ex. owls and snakes) Their burrows get blocked by debris so they cannot exit, or the burrows are flooded by heavy rains. Native plants can get a boost when non-natives are damaged but they can also suffer if the seeds of non-native plants are spread by hurricane winds over new areas. Fish are no exception to these changes. What most likely will occur would be a reversal of the conditions that cause a fish die-off due to hypoxia. At this time the water temperatures decline and the dissolved oxygen content will increase caused by the increase in the surface area of water and evaporation of warmer water in the turn over. However it could also be in excess. Heavy rainfall can cause a sudden drop of oxygen in water. It appears that the first was what happened. Their biggest danger would be electrical lines falling into the water electrocuting the fish. Also flooding can wash sediment or larger items into streams, destroying habitat.

As all the dead trees decompose, they release substantial carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, exacerbating global warming. At the same time, sediment the hurricane washed into the water increases nutrients to unhealthy levels, Blocked out sunlight, due to suspended particles in the water, changes compounds necessary for the development of a balanced system. Fresh water over seagrass beds destroys a crucial habitat for migratory waterfowl and juvenile fish. Damaged forests increase the risk of wildfire, insect infestation, and the establishment of invasive species. Finally, the storm sent an enormous amount of freshwater into the Gulf, leading to a dramatic reduction in salinity that may affect many marine fisheries for years. Hurricane rainfall also washes pollutants and sediment onto coral reefs, blocking out sunlight causing algae to grow.

Just as storm winds displace wildlife from our local habitat to some other place, the winds and flooding may also result in the movement of species into our habitat that you have not seen before. Be on the lookout for the return of those species that may have left, as well as new visitors to our wildlife community.

PICTURES TAKEN THE DAY AFTER THE STORM

vultures on the electric pole

White Ibis feast on our soccer field

