

A Tale of Two Storms: Rita Was the Other One

by Lt. Remy Broussarda



Several weeks into the aftermath of the two most powerful storms to ever strike the Louisiana coastline, I happened to be speaking with a fellow game warden from the state of Colorado. The subject of conversation inevitably turned to the hurricanes. We discussed the situation in southeast Louisiana, and I mentioned that it would be many years

before Cameron Parish recovered to a pre-Hurricane Rita state, if ever at all. His next comment was one I will never forget: “What do you mean? The news said that you guys just got a little flooding and a few trees down.”

I proceeded to follow up his comments with a detailed explanation of the predicament that befell the thousands of residents of Cameron

Parish, as well as a good many more in Calcasieu, Vermilion and other parishes near the coast of Louisiana. I then added some punctuation to the explanation by e-mailing him an album of pictures from both storms. His reply to this was one of apology. He had no idea of the devastation that had been handed to much of southwest Louisiana.

This is the case with the vast majority of those living outside of the area affected by Hurricane Rita. They simply haven’t been supplied with information through the mainstream media. This was evident even within hours of the storm making landfall. My parents, family and friends were

evacuated to areas ranging from Baton Rouge to Nashville, Tenn., and beyond. Once cell phone service was reestablished and I was able to contact everyone and give them updates from “the front,” they were flabbergasted by the amount of damage. It was so severe that I dared not e-mail pictures to my wife, for fear of her attempting to come back immediately to try and expedite salvage operations. This was not a possibility without electricity, food, shelter, water and many roads still blocked by debris for a matter of weeks.

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Little remains of the LDWF region office in Lake Charles after Hurricane Rita.

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My intent in writing this account is not to stir up the proverbial hornet’s nest. I simply want to set the record straight as to the severity of Hurricane Rita. Some may counter that if I had been in New Orleans, I would have something to compare to the aftermath of Hurricane Rita. Well, believe me, I was there.

For the better part of two weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck, Louisiana wildlife agents were in the thick of



things in and around New Orleans. We—along with hundreds of others who did what they had to do—trudged in waist deep water, and sewage, and Lord knows what else. We smelled the stench of death

that surrounded everything and everyone we came into contact with. We laid down nights after 18- to 20-hour days and prayed for those we were able to evacuate as well as the ones we were too late to help.

We tied bodies to fences and poles, only to return to the area a week later and find them still floating where they had been left. We watched as men, women and children suffered heat exhaustion, dehy-



dration and some even death, as we struggled to provide many of them with the transportation that had been promised. We laughed with the few who still could and cried with the many who had lost all. Oh, yes, I was there. We witnessed things that you can't even speak of. It was an experience that none of us will ever forget, even if we had that option.

After only a few days at home and a return to a somewhat normal schedule, the unthinkable happened. It was then that a "once-in-a-lifetime-occurrence" struck again, as Hurricane Rita tar-

geted the southwest Louisiana coastline. We had yet to catch our breath when we began spinning up for yet another deadly encounter.

Rita focused everyone's attention on the middle Texas coastline and then, as if to commit some cruel practical joke, turned north with a vengeance. At one point Rita was the holder of the second-lowest barometric pressure record of all time, with winds in excess of 200 miles per hour.

"What's her name" was quite a force to be reckoned with.

Mother Nature was kind enough to reduce the winds to about 160 miles per hour

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before destroying the coastline of southwest Louisiana. Again, the tides rose to a level never before seen in Louisiana.

In 1957, Hurricane Audrey made landfall in Cameron Parish. Hundreds of lives were lost and property loss was of catastrophic proportion. The old-timers still today tell their accounts of survival after the storm. That storm hit in an era that was without the

transportation and communication systems we have today. There were virtually no weather forecasters at that time. Forecasting the weather was little more than an educated guess. But everyone knew that it would truly be a horrific storm to top the effects of Hurricane Audrey.

In the early morning hours of Sept. 24, that storm raged. A new legend was born. This

time, Louisiana wildlife agents and citizens had the misfortune to witness firsthand the deadly scene that was playing out as the second act. The weather forecasters hit it on the head, eventually, as the storm bullied its way ashore. The true wind speed will never be known because all the weather equipment was decimated and rendered useless.

Hurricane Katrina had flooding and the water stayed. Hurricane Rita had high water as well—plenty of it. Only the water didn't stay. Instead, it charged ashore and then rushed back out to

sea. In the process, it either totally destroyed or simply carried with it thousands of homes and the livelihoods of all those who called lower Cameron Parish home.

Hurricane Katrina was in part responsible for the noticeable lack of fatalities in southwest Louisiana. With images of death following Katrina still fresh on our minds, preparation and evacuation robbed her sister Rita of that same legacy. A total of three deaths were attributed to Hurricane Rita. The lesson had been learned.

Only a few trees down? Just hours after the storm's passage, I was privileged to be

part of a military flight to assess damage and search for possible survivors. I was asked to go along as a sort of tour guide. Being the parish enforcement supervisor, I was told that I probably knew the area better than any of the other search team leaders. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined the sights that met me over that short time. Even though I had traveled this area my entire life and was well acquainted with every major landmark, I was hard pressed to find many things that were recognizable from their pre-storm appearance.

In the days that followed I would travel the coastline from Sabine Pass, Texas, to the eastern edge of Vermilion Parish. In the course of this 130-mile journey, it's safe to say that there were not a total of 10 inhabitable dwellings. Nothing but pilings stood where lavish Acadian-style homes once graced the Cheniers. Brick and steel buildings and the businesses within were reduced to piles of rub-

ble, or worse yet, had completely disappeared from their foundations. Many miles of roads were impassible because of debris. Thousands of dead cattle littered the once prolific marshland beyond the ridges. Centuries-old homes, which had withstood storms such as Audrey, simply could not bear the brunt of Rita. The landscape of the coastal plains has been changed forever. Though not many lives had been lost, thousands of human "lifestyles" would be relegated to the history books.

Despite all of this destruction, the evacuated inhabitants were virtually unable to acquire any information of their plight through the national media. But then face it, property and history lost is not as sensational on the national news as burning malls or helicopter rescues or looting in the streets that quickly followed in the aftermath of Katrina. By watching the national news, we were, however, able to stay abreast of who was blaming whom for the shortfalls in hurricane preparation.

There are many noticeable similarities between Katrina and Rita. The homes are just as gone. The jobs are just as non-existent. Families are just as displaced. People are suffering the same hurt.

"What's-her-name" will never be forgotten by anyone who had a chance to witness her destruction. Years from now the old-timers will be telling tales of the rescues and sights associated with the two sisters, Katrina and Rita. And when they do, you can rest assured that the names of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Enforcement Division agents will be included in those stories. ■



Lt. Remy Broussard helps assess damage and look for storm victims in need.

PHOTO GALLERY

