

U.S.

Officials Warn of Health Hazards in the Wake of Harvey

Wild animals, contaminated water among the dangers facing those returning to their homes



A volunteer in Orange, Texas, heads out to look for people in need of help after torrential rains pounded Southeast Texas following Hurricane and Tropical Storm Harvey causing widespread flooding. PHOTO: SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

By Tawnell D. Hobbs

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As southeast Texans return to their flood-ravaged homes, local officials are warning about dangers associated with floodwaters, from alligators seeking higher ground to harmful bacteria floating from damaged septic systems.

The sheriff's office in Fort Bend County, located in the Houston metropolitan area, has asked residents to leave reptiles, like alligators, found on their properties alone until the water recedes, saying they are simply looking for higher ground.

“We have everything from snakes to alligators to fire ants,” said Lach Mullen, spokesperson for the Office of Emergency Management in Fort Bend County. “Even though evacuation orders have been lifted, people have to be wary of new occupants in their homes. They don’t want to occupy the same space as you; they will leave on their own when they can.”

If the situation is dangerous, Mr. Mullen said to call a game warden.

Texas game wardens helped remove a 12-foot alligator to a less-populated area on Friday. That same day, the Harris County Precinct 4 Constable's Office reported that its deputies were met by an alligator in a flooded home near Lake Houston.

"Alligators are wary of people, but keep your distance," Jonathan Warner, an alligator program leader at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said in a news release. "Never approach, harass or feed an alligator."

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The wildlife department noted that gators are a protected game species, critical to the health and balance of aquatic ecosystems in southeast Texas.

Larry Satterwhite, a Houston assistant police chief, said at a news conference Saturday that while out on the water with the fire department, he "saw a snake swimming right toward the boat."

"It has become very unsafe out there," he said.

Damaged septic systems that could release harmful bacteria into floodwaters also are a concern.

In Brazoria County, an area south of Houston that had widespread flooding, County Judge L.M. "Matt" Sebesta Jr. warned of contact with floodwaters during a news conference Saturday.

"The floodwaters that we have that are flowing across the county are coming from very rural areas where everyone is on septic systems," Mr. Sebesta said. "We all know what are in septic systems—that is now what is in all those waters. So please, if you can stay out of the water, it is not healthy to be in that water."

Other animals reportedly spotted in neighborhoods include a wild hog and raccoons. About 50 baby squirrels rescued in the Austin area are being rehabilitated by Wild West Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Amarillo.

"They're doing fabulous. We're feeding them puppy formula every three or four hours," said Stephanie Oravetz, executive director of the rehabilitation center. "Good Samaritans are bringing them in, finding them once the waters recede."

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