

# How to Save Your Pets During Rapid-Onset Disasters

Preparing for the unexpected, including natural disasters, is essential for every pet owner. But sometimes even the best intentions aren't enough to save animals in the path of nature's wrath.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- December 30, 2021, a wildfire destroyed more than 1,000 homes in Boulder County, Colorado in a matter of six hours
- Many pet owners weren't home when the fire broke out; roadblocks and dense smoke made returning to retrieve pets impossible
- It's estimated that more than 1,000 pets died in the disaster, which is known as the Marshall Fire
- Several apps are now available or being developed that would connect pet owners who need help rescuing their pet; the apps allow people to post notifications about pets left in homes, so those nearby could rescue them in time
- A report is also calling for research into pitfalls in the emergency notification system, which prevented many pet owners from returning home in time to rescue their pets

Preparing for the unexpected, including natural disasters, is essential for every pet owner. But sometimes even the best intentions aren't enough to save animals in the path of nature's wrath. Such was the case December 30, 2021, when a wildfire destroyed more than 1,000 homes in Boulder County, Colorado in a matter of six hours.<sup>1</sup>

Many pet owners were at work or traveling for the holidays when the fire broke out. Quickly, roadblocks and dense smoke made returning to retrieve pets impossible. It's estimated that more than 1,000 pets died in the disaster, which is known as the Marshall Fire. Now, efforts are being made to reduce lives lost in the future by harnessing human relationships to save pets in harm's way.

## 'Urban Firestorm' Highlights Dangers of Rapid-Onset Disasters

Colorado's Marshall Fire involved a perfect storm of ideal fire conditions, including high winds and parched grasslands. What started as a brush fire quickly spread into nearby densely populated neighborhoods. "The primary fuel source switched from dried vegetation to structures, and the fire quickly spread from home to home," a commentary on the disaster, published in the journal *Animals*, reported.<sup>2</sup>

*"Although much of the literature on pets in disasters associates the failure to evacuate pets with a weak or absent human-animal bond, rapid-onset disasters challenge the foundations of that claim."*

*... The fire began in open grassland and quickly became an 'urban firestorm' when it spread into densely populated areas. Due to the timing of the fire's onset, owners could not return home to rescue their pets. Although first responders, volunteers, and other evacuees rescued some animals, many died inside their homes."*

Many pet owners were not at home when the fire began. Some residents said they didn't receive emergency notifications or evacuation orders. By the time they learned of the fire — primarily via media or word of mouth — some major highways were closed, other routes were crowded with evacuees and local roads were blocked off, so travel wasn't possible.

Problems with the emergency notification system, resulting in evacuation delays, may have factored into the high number of pets who died. While 24,289 emergency notifications were sent out by the Boulder County Sheriff's office during the disaster, only 19% were confirmed as received.<sup>3</sup>

Other residents affected by the Marshall Fire said they weren't aware they needed to opt in to the warning system ahead of time in order to receive such alerts. According to the Animal report:<sup>4</sup>

*"This research serves as a reminder of the need to include pets in emergency planning for households. Information on such planning is widely available online. However, even the most comprehensive plans would have been of little use in the Marshall Fire because so many of the area's residents were away from home.*

*Future research needs to explore pitfalls in the emergency notification system, which prevented many pet owners from returning home in sufficient time to rescue their animals."*

## **Connecting Neighbors to Rescue Pets**

Several apps are now available or being developed that would connect pet owners who need help rescuing their pet. During the Marshall Fire, some pets were saved by residents who knew a neighbor's pet was inside the home.

The apps allow people to post notifications about pets left in homes, so those nearby could rescue them in time. The apps rely on human relationships to save animals, which may be the best hope in cases of rapid-onset disasters. The researchers explain:<sup>5</sup>

*"The effectiveness of a rescue app requires people who can enter one's home in an emergency. Moreover, pets should also trust these people enough to allow them to enter their home, handle them, leash them, put them in carriers, and transport them as needed. For instance, one Superior resident's dog was home, in a crate, when the Marshall Fire approached the neighborhood.*

*A neighbor knew the resident was not home. As the neighbor was evacuating, he went to the house, kicked in the door, and rescued the dog, who certainly would have died. News coverage shows the neighbor putting the dog in his car. Thus, social connections may be the best way to save the life of a pet."*

David Crawford, who founded the nonprofit Animal Help Now,<sup>6</sup> is developing one such rescue app that could help **save cats**, dogs and other pets during fires and other emergencies. "When disaster strikes and you are away and can't get home, you can, with the press of a button, alert people that your animal needs [to be] rescued," he told HealthDay.<sup>7</sup>

## Do You Have a Pet Emergency Evacuation Plan?

If you live in an area where wildfires are common, it's essential to have a plan in place ahead of time to evacuate your pets safely. Even if you don't live in a wildfire-prone area, natural disaster can strike at any time, so having a disaster plan in place is important for all pet owners.

Now, before a disaster occurs, know where you'll go. Seek out animal-friendly public shelters or speak with friends or family outside of your immediate area who you and your pets could stay with if necessary. You can also keep a list of pet-friendly hotels in case you can't find a shelter that accepts animals.

Fortunately, many shelters are becoming more animal-friendly, while laws have been passed requiring state and local emergency responses to account for pets.<sup>8</sup> Also, get your pet used to entering and being transported in a kennel or **pet carrier** ahead of time. When you have only minutes to spare, having a pet who will readily enter a carrier can be the difference between life and death. During the Marshall Fire, the report states:<sup>9</sup>

*"[E]ven those who were at home could not necessarily evacuate their animals in time. One pet owner had noticed the wind and seen smoke in the distance but had not received an emergency notification. She was putting out her recycling, struggling with the containers in the wind, when a neighbor drove by, honked the horn, and shouted, 'Get out! Get out!'*

*The woman ran back into the house to get her three cats, but she could not get them into the carriers. She left the house, thinking she would be back later that day. When she tried to return, the road was blocked off."*

When you evacuate with your pets, place a rescue alert sticker on the front door and write "Evacuated" across the sticker so rescue workers know you're all accounted for, and bring an emergency kit with you. For the emergency kit, use a portable waterproof container and be sure it has the essentials: pet food, a safety harness with tags and leash, water and a portable bowl, medications, first-aid supplies, medical records and proof of ownership.

If your pet has a microchip, be sure the information connected to it, including your email address and phone number, is kept current. Being prepared for the unexpected will give you and your pets the best chance at a safe evacuation, even at a moment's notice.

### Sources and References

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,9</sup> [Animals 2023, 13\(3\), 416; doi: 10.3390/ani13030416](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Animal Help Now](#)

<sup>7,8</sup> [HealthDay February 13, 2023](#)

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