



Tim Cooper inspects the remains of an alligator he says was killed by the storm surge.

By Thomas B. Shea for USA TODAY

Ike destroys wildlife 'truck stop'

By Marisol Bello, USA TODAY



Tim Cooper picks up debris Saturday at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. Cooper said Hurricane Ike moved more quickly than expected.
By Thomas B. Shea for USA TODAY

ANAHUAC, Texas — For hundreds of species of migratory birds heading south this fall and winter, Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge is the last place they can fill up on food and water before making the 600-mile trek across the Gulf of Mexico.

They may not be able to do that this year, after Hurricane Ike decimated the refuge known by bird-watchers around the country for the array of migratory and coastal birds that pass through it.

"It's like a truck stop," says Matt Whitbeck, the refuge's wildlife biologist. "Except this winter, the truck stop will be closed. That's what I'm afraid of."

Ike's 110-mile-an-hour winds and 20-foot saltwater tidal surge flooded the freshwater marshes that make up the Anahuac and two nearby coastal wildlife refuges, McFaddin and Texas Point.

The brackish water began to recede late last week, leaving dead and scorched vegetation across the 106,000 acres of the three sanctuaries.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the three sites, sustained heavy losses. All of its facilities — welcome centers, offices and warehouses — are crumbled shells. The water systems that help fresh water flow through the marshes were flooded, and up to three-quarters of its trucks and other equipment were damaged, says Tim Cooper, project manager for the three sites.

At the sites' main offices in Anahuac, Cooper says, "This building is all we have left, and we don't even own this building. We rent it."

Cooper says he and his team had little time to save equipment because the storm moved more quickly than expected through their part of southeastern Texas.

Ike's impact is financially devastating for the refuges, says Desiree Sorenson-Groves, vice president for government affairs of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, which advocates for the nation's 548 refuges.

Ike caused an estimated \$260 million in damage, she says. That brings the total damage to the nation's refuges this year from natural disasters to about \$300 million.

The total is almost three-quarters of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's \$434 million budget for the year, Sorenson-Groves says. "Unless Congress does a supplemental appropriation, there is no way they will recover," she says.

Anahuac is a refuge for 300 species of birds and other animals, including bobcats, muskrats, alligators and other reptiles. Those animals will have to find new habitats, a task that has become more difficult as urban development shrinks their environment, Sorenson-Groves says.

Bird enthusiast Wayne Petersen says the refuges along the Texas coast are popular among bird-watchers. Anahuac, he says, is well-known for a species of marsh bird known as a rail.

"Anyone interested in birds anywhere around the country is going to be saddened that these great refuges were so badly hammered," says Petersen, who works with the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

At the Anahuac refuge one day last week, Michele Whitbeck, outdoor recreation planner for the three refuges, walked for the first time since the storm through the building that used to house her office. Walls were blown away, leaving only wood frames. Chunks of tiling and roof insulation covered the floor. Overturned furniture, file cabinets and appliances were scattered. Everything was covered in muck.

The butterfly garden, once home to a rainbow of flowers, was a sodden brown mess.

"It's pretty overwhelming," Whitbeck says. "I've been here 10 years, and so much of our work and our effort went into what's gone on out here."

She says it will take time for the marsh to flush away the saltwater and recover. The speed of the recovery will depend partly on how much rain the area gets.

To help the process along, the Wildlife Service plans to burn the vegetation in the refuges to allow new plants to grow. The agency is still assessing the damage to its infrastructure and the marshes and pasture land that make up the refuges.

The marsh and its inhabitants "are trying to rebuild, just like we are," she says. "Something may come back, but it may be different than what it was. Time will tell."

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